

SCOTPRESS

BLOW BACK

by

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a STAR TREK fanzine

N.C.

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Story and Artwork

by

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BLOW BACK

Chapter 1

In the star-filled vacuum of space a sleek interstellar shuttlecraft was sweeping along on course for the Epsilon Eridani system. Silence reigned in the comfortable cabin, barely disturbed by the steady drone of the warp engine and the faint hiss of the life-support system.

In the cockpit the navigational instruments hummed and clicked softly. Lights gleaming from the console brought into relief the regular features of the solitary man sitting at the helm and glinted on the receiver plugged into his pointed ear. His dark eyes surveyed the readings on display, but presently he allowed his attention to slacken and leaned back in his chair with a sigh.

The last half-hour had been eventful as the craft wriggled its way through a thick asteroid swarm; the way was practically clear now but for a few asteroids still shooting past every now and then. Once the long-range scanner gave the all-clear navigation could be set back onto automatic. Such were the thoughts of the lone Vulcan when the door slid open behind him and a stifled yawn heralded a tousled-haired individual who stretched lazily before dropping into the co-pilot's chair.

"Hi, Spock. How are you doing?"

"Good morning, Captain. All read-outs are normal. However we are running 20.43 minutes behind schedule."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"We came across an uncharted

asteroid band but we should make up for the lost time within an hour."

"Come on, Spock, 20 minutes more or less makes no difference. We're on leave... no problems, no command duties for a month. Doesn't that feel good?" Kirk watched the stars slip past on the forward viewport. "Asteroids, you said? Funny, I didn't feel anything. Was it rough?"

"Somewhat," Spock nodded.

"You should have called me." Kirk sounded reproachful.

"Unnecessary, Jim. You were sound asleep and the situation did not warrant a co-pilot."

"All right. It's my shift now. Go and get some sleep."

"Thank you, Captain," Spock replied scanning the sensor readings, "but after we have avoided the asteroids presently on a collision course, we can safely lock navigation back onto automatic. Hold on!" he added as his hands flew over the console and deftly flung the craft into a steep turning dive around some huge chunks of rock hurtling towards them.

Simultaneously an ominous crash followed by a loud curse was heard aft. Their eyes flew first to the control panel, looking for warning lights, then to exchange a significant glance.

"It seems that the Doctor is back among us," Spock commented serenely as he straightened up the nose of the craft and smoothly resumed their original

heading.

"Now, what has he been up to?" wondered Kirk, getting to his feet. "I'll go and take a look..."

The door opened abruptly, revealing the indignant face of Doctor McCoy. "Oh, you're here, Jim. Will someone kindly tell me what the heck's going on?"

"Asteroids, Bones. Are you all right? No bones broken, I hope?"

"Very funny!" McCoy grumbled. "I'm fine, thank you. I only dropped my brand-new razor in the wash-basin and the damned thing has broken apart; my razor, I mean. Mind if I borrow yours, Jim?"

"Of course not. Help yourself."

"I deplore the mishap, Doctor," the Vulcan put in. "If you let me have your shaver, I shall attempt to fix it for you."

"Oh, would you? Mighty nice of you, Spock... Well, I'd better get ready." McCoy turned to go, then as if on second thought, he looked back and enquired, "How much longer before we get there?"

"Another 13.45 hours," Spock informed him.

"That long? Damn! I didn't remember Vulcan being so far away." The door snapped shut behind him.

"Poor old Bones!" Kirk commented. "Never at his best at the crack of dawn."

"I wonder if we were right in asking him to come with us, Captain," Spock remarked.

"Of course we were. Don't worry Spock. I'm sure he'll enjoy himself,

although I doubt he'll ever admit it."

Some time later, having showered, changed clothes and retreated into a short meditation, Spock joined his companions in the tiny lounge-cum-galley, from which drifted appetising smells of coffee and food. He sat down to his usual dish of fruit and cereal and quietly listened to his friends, who were talking with their mouths full.

The conversation revolved round the invitation the trio had been sent by Spock's parents, Sarek and Amanda. Kirk had been touched by the kind words Amanda had put in the message and had been delighted at both the prospect of spending his month's leave at Spock's family home in ShiKahr, and of furthering his acquaintance with his friend's parents. McCoy, although secretly flattered to be included in the invitation, had at first been rather reluctant. However after submitting, as a matter of form, to a little persuasion he had embarked with his friends.

"It's too bad your parents will be away, Spock," Kirk remarked. "How long did you say they would be?"

"Amanda mentioned another week or so. It will largely depend on the outcome of Sarek's diplomatic mission. It is unfortunate. On the other hand it will give you time to accustom yourselves to the climatic conditions and to familiarise yourselves with our traditions and way of life before your official introduction to the Clan."

The jaws of both Humans dropped in dismay at the tranquil announcement. "Er... tell me, Spock... what exactly does that entail?" Kirk asked in trepidation.

His First Officer regarded him blandly. "Just what I said, Jim. My parents will give a reception in your

honour and present you to the Xtmprsqzntwlfed Clan. That is all."

"Well, this is all very flattering, I'm sure, but I didn't anticipate receiving red-carpet treatment on Vulcan. I'd rather assumed that this would be just an informal R & R."

"It will be an informal leave, Jim. However as you and McCoy are Starfleet officers of some renown it is logical that your presence in ShiKahr should arouse a certain degree of interest," Spock explained while sipping his tea. "Therefore a few social gatherings are to be expected."

"Oh Lord!" groaned McCoy. "I hate formal occasions! And when we are presented to that whatever-you-said clan of yours, does that include the old girl? ... I mean TPau? No offense meant, Spock, but I might as well be prepared for the worst."

"It certainly does, Doctor. Moreover TPau, as Head of our House, is entitled to a courtesy call upon my arrival. I assume she will also expect a visit from our honoured guests."

McCoy's blue eyes rolled upward. "Oh, joy!" he breathed.

"Why, Doctor, you do not seem to be taken with the idea. Are you afraid of a frail old lady?" Spock's eyes held a sardonic twinkle in their depths.

"Afraid? I'm scared stiff, Spock! And I don't mind admitting it. As for your frail old lady... don't make me laugh. To judge from your Kun-ut-whatsit ceremony, TPau's as hard as nails!"

"Bones has a point there," Kirk remarked. "She is a formidable old lady. Even the big guns on the Federation Council cower before her."

"Agreed, Captain. TPau also has the reputation of being a strong-willed woman in the Vulcan community, but she has great responsibilities and a reputation to live up to. You may find her somewhat different in private."

"Really?" Kirk looked dubious. "It might be worth a try."

"Are you sure, Jim?" McCoy asked caustically. "And just how do you intend to explain the fact that you're alive and kicking when the last time she saw you, you were very dead indeed?"

"Damn! ... I hadn't thought of that. I suppose she heard the true story eventually, didn't she, Spock?"

"She did, Captain, but when I met her on my last visit the subject was not raised."

"Quite," Kirk replied with a knowing look. "I'm sure you all had more pressing problems to deal with."

"However," Spock continued, "I understand that TPau and the High Council were officially informed of your ... survival by my parents, Jim."

"That's what I thought," Kirk said. "By the way, sorry to bring up painful memories, but it is best to be prepared. What about your ex? What are the chances of us running into TPring or that man of hers?"

Spock's face assumed a stony look. "Since she chose the Kal-if-fee, TPring and I have nothing in common. The bond has definitely been severed. That is all as far as I am concerned. To the best of my knowledge Stonn has been stationed on a Research Colony for some time. So the odds of meeting either of them in ShiKahr are extremely low and I do not believe that..."

The hoot of a signal cut him short and brought them all to their feet. The Captain beat his friend to the door and dived to the control board. "Let me deal with it, Spock, it's my watch. You let Bones do the dishes and go and get some sleep."

Dutifully the First Officer turned round and eyed McCoy who was already stacking crockery into the cleaner.

"Well, Spock, what are you standing there for?" drawled the Doctor, "You've got your orders."

A Spockian eyebrow and an "Aye, Doctor," answered him and the Vulcan retired with dignity to the aft of the ship.

Chapter 2

At the end of a hot Vulcan day a young woman was pottering about her garden in the residential section of ShiKahr. Gliding barefoot across the cool tiles and humming to herself she offered a pretty picture in her light sleeveless tunic; her auburn hair loosely bound up on her head and unruly curls escaping around her delicate pointed ears. She had turned the sprinklers on and was busy watering her potted plants, which were drooping from thirst, her quiet activity hardly disturbing the birds perched on the marble edge of the pool.

Presently footsteps ringing on the tiles made them stir and the sound of a male voice had them flying away in a flurry of wings.

"Sister? ... are you there? ... T'Kahalin?"

The girl straightened up, pushing straggling wisps of hair from her brow, and turned round expectantly. Her lovely

face lit up at the sight of the young man coming through the arcade and they touched hands in salute.

"Greetings, sister. I have come to take my leave of you," said the visitor.

"Greetings, Sirvann. When do you leave?" she asked, sitting on the curb of the fountain. He seated himself cross-legged at her side.

"Soon. At dawn tomorrow. We should be away for twelve days, possibly less. It will depend on the success of Sarek's mission."

"Is the Lady Amanda also going with you?"

"She is. At the express request of the Alien Department. However I believe that neither she nor the Ambassador are happy with this assignment." Sirvann stole a glance at his sister, whose countenance only expressed polite interest, but being sure that he had aroused her curiosity he explained, "Naturally they do not object to this particular mission. They only regret having to leave now, of all times... Do you know why?" he asked, his grey eyes alight with suppressed excitement.

"I do not, but obviously you do and you can't wait to tell me." T'Kahalin regarded her brother with amused tolerance.

"You will not be so indifferent when you hear that Sarek expects a visitor within a few days. Don't you want to know who is coming, T'Kee?" he asked quizzically.

His insistence made her wonder and a strange feeling of excitement ran over her, which she quickly covered up with a gentle rebuff.

"Sirvann," she chided, "will you kindly refrain from using that childish nickname... and come to the point."

"Very well, sister. This very morning I was informed by Sarek of Commander Spock's arrival in a few days' time. He is to stay for a month."

Had Sirvann hoped to surprise his sister then he succeeded, to judge by her wide-eyed stare and the delicate green flush on her cheeks.

"Oh!" she breathed. Then recovering her poise, "Oh, indeed?" she said with feigned indifference but, conscious of her blush she turned her face away and gave all her attention to her reflection in the pool.

"Indeed," replied Sirvann, secretly amused, "Sarek also mentioned Captain Kirk and another officer... the Chief Surgeon, I believe. Amanda was giving instructions about their rooms a moment ago. Well, T'Kee, isn't this interesting?"

She nodded thoughtfully, absorbed in the water that she let trickle through her fingers and presently said, "Indeed. But why, dear brother, should you assume that it is of particular interest to me?"

He gave her a sly look. "Because, dear sister, I have the impression that since you met Spock two years ago, his fate does not leave you indifferent - or am I mistaken?"

The girl returned his teasing look. "You may be right," she replied primly, "but I, at least, do not indulge in hero-worship."

"Don't you, sister? You surprise me." The two exchanged a gaze of complicity, well aware of the admiration and respect that each felt for Spock and of

the disapproval that these unseemly emotions earned them from some of their relations. 'The Old Guard of ShiKahr' as they were dubbed by the younger generation.

Sirvann, whose position as private secretary to Ambassador Sarek naturally gave him access to first-hand information about Spock's doings, was the dour Vulcans' elected target, but he took it in his stride. With a half-smile he touched her hand saying, "I must go now. I still have much to do at the office."

"I hope you will return soon. You would not want to miss Spock and the other guests."

"In any eventuality," Sirvann pointed out, "you will have the opportunity to meet them before long. I am sure that Spock will attend your next concert; he could not miss that."

She looked doubtful. "Why should he? He will be engaged with his friends. He will show them our world and, let us be logical, he probably does not even remember me."

Her brother got to his feet and looked down at her and there was that in his expression which once again brought a jade flush to her face. "I beg to differ, T'Kee. That is very unlikely. I wish you success at the concert. Lash'D'Oro V'Suka*, sister."

As the sound of his footsteps faded into the distance, T'Kahalin sat by the pool, staring absentmindedly at her image that was slightly distorted by the ripples stirred by her hand. Unconsciously her thoughts reverted to the man who was to arrive in a few days and whose memory re-occurred much too often for her peace of mind.

**Live long and prosper*

/Will he remember me? Will he seek to see me again? When we last met in the park, he did indeed speak of visits, of musical gatherings when he next returned, but ... will he care now? And even if he does, will he have the time, with the Humans to look after and entertain?/

Illogically she let herself indulge once again in the bitter-sweet pleasure of reliving some of their encounters; from the magical moment when their eyes had met for the first time, that day at the Academy, to the enchanted hours spent in sharing their love of music. With a shiver she recalled her shock of hearing about his abduction by Romulan spies and the relief when he was found alive.

Imperceptibly these memories conjured up the lean features and the dark magnetic gaze which had captured her attention from the very first. She sighed. */Why, oh why was she haunted by this fascinating being who, logically, must have forgotten her by now? Teasing, teasing man! /*

She stood up abruptly, startling the birds so that they flew in all directions, and made the decision, there and then, to cast him out of her mind.

A wise but impossible decision.

Chapter 3

Jim Kirk eased the nose of the shuttle into the allotted berth and switched off the controls. Then leaning back in the pilot's seat he said with satisfaction, "Voila! I still haven't lost my touch, have I, Bones?"

The Doctor replied with a grin, "Fishing for compliments, Jim? Yeah, that was neat even if you don't reach Sulu's standard, but then ... who can?"

"Who can, indeed?" Kirk retorted,

than asked, "Spock? Everything okay?"

Spock, who had been holding a mysterious conversation with the orbital dock control, removed his earphone and looked round. "Affirmative, Captain. I have just confirmed our request for shuttle servicing and parking. Also I have been advised that the next planet-bound transfer is due in 35 standard minutes. We just have time." He stood up and going to the outer hatch began to deactivate the safety locks.

"What about our gear, Spock?" asked McCoy, indicating their bags piled to one side.

"The dock personnel will handle them. Just take what you wish to keep with you."

McCoy slung the strap of his medikit over his shoulder. "Ready! Come on, Jim, we've already checked everything three times. Let's go!" he said impatiently. They joined Spock who was already outside supervising the loading of their bags on to an anti-grav cart. The Doctor stared around him then nudged the Captain.

"Take a peep at those guys, Jim," he hissed, nodding at the dock attendants. "I wouldn't be surprised if Snow White popped round the corner."

Kirk stifled a giggle and had to admit that McCoy's flight of fancy was perfectly justified. With their pointed ears, red pointed caps and curly-toed boots the Vulcans seemed to have just stepped out of a fairy tale. The Doctor grinned, as pleased as a kid at a pantomime. "Just imagine Spock in that get-up!" he whispered. "The real pixie."

"Gentlemen," cut in a cool voice, "if you would kindly descend from your fairyland perhaps we could proceed to

the embarkation area." Spock, a light bag slung over his shoulder, was regarding them with carefully controlled impatience. The elfin personnel had already left with the baggage cart; the two friends exchanged a sheepish grin and joined the Vulcan, who set a brisk pace.

As they boarded the elevator McCoy remarked, "We were struck by those porters back there, Spock. I've never seen more original uniforms."

"So I heard, Doctor," the Vulcan blandly replied, "and so did everyone within earshot. This way, please," and he led them into a waiting-room.

"Bones," said Kirk in an aside, "we'd better remember that everyone here is endowed with Spock's sharp hearing."

McCoy made a face. "Let's hope they have never heard of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs!"

"Oh well," Kirk shrugged philosophically, "it's one of two things, Bones. Either those fellows don't speak Standard and we're okay or they do and our comments will be probably dismissed as pure Human aberration."

"Probably," the Doctor chuckled.

Spock shepherded his guests to a vacant table in the lounge and after ordering drinks for them he went off to check on their flight. Left to themselves Kirk and McCoy relaxed in their comfortable chairs and watched with idle curiosity the other passengers moving about. The Doctor remarked, "It's so quiet in here, for all the crowd, isn't it?"

"That's Vulcan, Bones. These people never raise their voices; we'll need to get used to that, among other things," Kirk replied.

"Which reminds me," McCoy interjected, "we'd better take our dose of tri-ox right now." He reached down for his bag and as he rummaged for his medikit he suddenly had the eerie feeling of being watched. He looked up and his eyes collided with the cold stare of a hefty-looking individual standing with a group of Vulcans a few metres away. Taken aback by the fixed glare, McCoy reciprocated with one of his own. At once the man reacted with the disdainful raising of one eyebrow and then deliberately turned his back.

"What the hell..." fumed the Doctor. "Never seen such bad manners... Good God!" A shocked McCoy had just realised who the man was.

"What's the matter?" Kirk asked.

"Guess who's here, Jim." McCoy dropped his voice. "Big fellow in a brown cloak, right behind me."

Kirk shot a covert glance and then nodded, "The man facing the other way? Yeah... looks vaguely familiar... some-one you know?"

"You bet! It's Stonn, Jim."

"Stonn? Are you sure?"

"Positive. I recognised his face but I couldn't place him at first. Then he looked at me and I'm sure now."

"Damn!" Kirk cursed softly. "Looks like Spock has miscalculated the odds this time. On our very first day we have to run bang into that guy. You know, Bones, I'm not vindictive but T'Pol's attitude at Spock's aborted wedding still rankles."

"And quite rightly, too," McCoy hotly replied. "You'd need to be a saint to forget how she used you, and Lord knows

you're no saint, Jim! But the point is... what do we do?"

"Do? What do you mean? There's nothing we can do."

"I mean... do we tell Spock?"

"Of course we do, but not here, not now. Anyway," Kirk looked over McCoy's shoulder, "Stonn's no longer here."

"Good riddance," said the Doctor. "Ah, here's Spock."

"All set, Spock?" asked Kirk getting to his feet.

"All set, Captain. The ShiKahr flight has been announced. This way..."

Chapter 4

/Yes, on reflection, there was something to be said for Vulcan hospitality/ mused Doctor McCoy, refreshed and pleasantly mellowed after a nap and a third mint julep mixed just to his taste. At that moment the ship's surgeon was reclining at his ease in a garden chair on the shady side of the patio idly watching Kirk's energetic performance in the pool. */Just like Jim to waste energy in physical exertion instead of relaxing in the shade!/*

"Illogical," he chuckled. Taking a swig from his cool drink, McCoy glanced approvingly at his surroundings; a pleasant combination of babbling fountains and shimmering pool on a backdrop of dark polished granite, brightened by vines and blossoms exuding a sweet heavy scent. */Yes, this is a beautiful place./* Never had McCoy imagined that he would be so taken with Spock's home, a stately Vulcan mansion enlivened by the taste and touch of a

charming Human woman.

Only two days had gone by since their arrival and already he and Jim had made themselves at home with an ease that had surprised him. Kirk could fit in anywhere but McCoy, harder to please, had been for all his misgivings pleasurably impressed by the size and style of Sarek's estate and by the courteous welcome given by the staff. He had to hand it to the Vulcans; for smooth efficiency there was no-one to beat them.

From the moment of their landing at the Shanaikahr shuttle-port things had gone like clockwork. After a brief routine check through passenger control Spock had whisked them away to an underground parking area where one of Sarek's air-cars, their bags already stacked in the back, was waiting for them. Spock had brought the humming car out into the open then putting on speed had swept them off over the desert to ShiKahr and its oasis. When they eventually landed at the back of the house, Staurak and T'Mina, the housekeepers, had been waiting on the doorstep to greet them. The Doctor had felt that for all their Vulcan formality, they were making him and Kirk very welcome indeed; and the manner in which the old couple had greeted Spock had been quite revealing of the affection they bore him. Yes, so far, McCoy had to admit that this shoreleave on Vulcan was not such a bad idea after all.

A silent presence at his side broke in on his thoughts and looking up McCoy produced a long appreciative whistle.

"My word, Spock! You sure look dandy in that attire. I hope TPau was duly impressed."

Spock glanced down at his bronze-coloured pants and tunic trimmed with small gems at the front and replied,

"Believe me, Doctor, it would take more than this to impress T'Pol."

"I can quite believe that, Spock," the other chuckled, "but what took you so long? Did she keep you in audience all that time?"

"No, I had several errands to run," Spock explained, and he sat down on the garden seat. "I hope that Staurak has attended to all your needs while I was away," he added.

"He certainly has," McCoy grinned, amused by this new facet - Spock the 'Perfect Host'. "Everything is fine. Jim has taken up residence in your pool; as for me... look at this!" He waved his glass. "What do you think this is?"

Spock tilted his head and looked. "One of those deleterious drinks that you usually indulge in, I presume," he offered.

"You presume right, although deleterious remains to be seen. But the point is... this is no ordinary booze, Spock! It is a genuine, home-made mint julep! Honestly, I never expected to drink mint-juleps on Vulcan, but your Staurak is a gem, not that I'm telling you anything new, I'm sure. I only mentioned the name... on the off chance, you know, and... hey presto... he produces one of the best juleps I've ever tasted. Which proves that all your fine talk about Vulcans knowing nothing of alcohol is just so much eyewash, Mr Spock!"

A burst of laughter drew their attention to the pool where Jim Kirk was sitting on the edge, his legs kicking lazy swirls in the water. "Ah, Spock," he said, "looks like you're being accused of deception. What have you to say in your defence?"

"This, Captain. I never said that Vulcans know nothing of intoxicating

beverages. I said that they avoid polluting their bloodstreams with them," Spock pointed out.

McCoy pounced at once. "Illogical! How can anyone know about food and drink without consuming them? And how come a Vulcan is such a connoisseur that he can produce any drink we ask him without batting an eyelid... and in record time? Or is he the exception that proves the rule?"

"Precisely, Doctor. Staurak is an exception. As you must be aware, being in charge of an ambassador's household requires specific qualities and abilities. These prove invaluable when, for instance, Sarek entertains alien diplomats. Staurak has necessarily acquired a vast knowledge of exotic drinks so as to meet, both promptly and efficiently, any of our guests' requirements."

Kirk nodded appreciatively. "A precious man, indeed. Tell me, how long has he been with your family?"

"For longer than I can tell. Long before I was born as he was in my father's service before Sarek met my mother."

"You are fond of him and of his wife too... I can tell," McCoy remarked noticing a subtle, gentle expression soften the Vulcan's features.

Spock looked at him. "I am, and I have every logical reason to be so. I cannot forget how supportive they were when I was a child."

Kirk smiled at him fondly. "Every logical reason," he repeated softly, imagining the lonely boy, rejected by his peers because of his Human heritage, seeking some comfort from the old couple.

The sound of measured footsteps in

the gallery announced Staurak, carrying both himself and a loaded tray with dignity. He silently set down a frosted glass of some effervescent liquid on the tiles by Kirk and a glass of fruit juice on the small table at Spock's elbow. Straightening up, he solemnly gazed at McCoy and enquired, "Do you require another mint julep, Doctor?"

The Doctor shook his head. "No, thanks, Staurak. This is my third and I can have too much of a good thing."

Spock raised an ironic eyebrow at McCoy's moderation but he refrained from comment, merely asking the old man, "Staurak, the Doctor wondered how you could provide his drink at such short notice. Would you explain."

"Certainly. It is simple. The mint julep recipe is logged in the kitchen databanks and since I had the required ingredients to hand there was no need for any unnecessary delay."

"Oh Lord," groaned McCoy. "My mint julep is out of a computer... I might have known!"

"But where did you get the data?" Kirk asked curiously.

"From various sources, Captain," Staurak replied primly. "Information was received from foreign visitors and, of course, from Lady Amanda. Regarding the mint julep, however, I must state that I replaced one of the components, since we do not stock mint in the house, I used Shul'kas, which tastes somewhat similar. I trust that you found it satisfactory, Doctor McCoy?"

"It was perfect," McCoy declared. "That little something extra, slightly spicy ... a great improvement, Staurak."

"I am gratified, Doctor."

"And what about this one?" Kirk asked holding up his glass. "It's delicious but I can't work out what it is."

"You won't, Jim," Spock told him, mildly amused. "It is Staurak's own recipe. Even Mother has given up guessing what is in it. Hasn't she, Staurak?"

"Indeed, Commander," Staurak's face held a touch of smugness. "This drink is called a 'Staurak's Special' within the family. It is a tonic concoction of herbs and a few other ingredients. I thought that the Captain might benefit from it after his strenuous exercises in the pool."

Kirk displayed one of his dazzling smiles. "Thank you, Staurak. You are really spoiling us."

In view of the Vulcan's blank stare, McCoy hastened to translate. "The Captain means that you are taking too much trouble for us."

"I beg to differ, sir. One can never take too much trouble," the old man replied quietly. To Spock he said, "Will you need anything else, Commander?"

"No, thank you, except for one thing. Do not call me Commander."

The glimmer of a smile crept onto the wrinkled face as Staurak bowed his head and turned to go. Then he turned back, saying, "T'Mina told me to say that she has made your chocolate cake for dinner," before he left discreetly.

"Your chocolate cake, Spock?" McCoy asked, all agog.

"A recipe that my mother brought from Earth," Spock calmly explained, "and that T'Mina adapted and improved considerably. The Terran name is, I

believe, 'Black Forest Gateau'. T'Mina knows that I am partial to that confection," he added rather sheepishly.

"Black Forest Gateau," Kirk was enthusiastic. "I love it, Spock. It's delicious. Bones, I think we picked the right place for shore-leave, what with a Cordon Bleu cook in the kitchen and a magician at the bar! But I suppose that your home is an exception, Spock?"

"It is," Spock replied dryly.

"What about T'Pau?" McCoy asked as a joke.

"As is to be expected, T'Pau's diet is purely Vulcan. Incidentally, she expressed a wish to receive you in her house."

"And a wish from T'Pau is tantamount to an order, I suppose," Kirk wryly suggested.

"Indeed, Jim. She is expecting our visit tomorrow at 6.15 hours."

"What? That early!" the Humans chorused in protest.

"Standard time," specified their deadpan host. "Local time, it will be 10.30."

McCoy rolled his eyes upward while Kirk shook his head at his First Officer. "In a teasing mood are you, Mr Spock? 10.30 is certainly a more reasonable hour to pay a call on a lady. But tell me, how should we dress? Casual? Dress uniform?"

"Uniforms would be superfluous. However, although Vulcans do not pay much attention to outer appearances I think formal dress would be appropriate. Also the hour specified for our visit implies that we are invited to partake of

the traditional mid-morning collation, the K'Has'Krut as we call it."

"Oh, great." McCoy brightened perceptibly. "That's jolly nice of T'Pau." Spock favoured him with a glance which shattered his illusions at once.

"I would not bank on a treat, if I were you, Doctor. I can tell you from personal experience that T'Pau's K'Has'Krut's are invariably Spartan. Therefore, as a compensation I have booked a table for lunch at Taillevent, the most reputable restaurant in the province. You will be able to eat your favourite Terran foods there."

"Do you mean that's it not just vegetarian? I could have a steak for instance?" McCoy sat up, suddenly revived.

"Certainly. They pride themselves on being able to offer specialities from the best cuisines of the galaxy."

"That sounds wonderful, Spock," Kirk smiled, "but I'm curious. This Taillevent sounds French to me... how come?"

"The place was opened by a Frenchman, many years ago. He was the first Earther to come and settle here after my mother set the example. It is still kept by the family."

"Fancy! A French restaurant in ShiKahr," the Doctor commented happily.

"There are quite a few restaurants which originate from various parts of the Federation, Doctor," Spock remarked. "The advantage of Taillevent is its location near the shopping centre, and as you spoke of looking for suitable desert clothing, Jim..."

"We shall certainly take a look at

the local stores. This is great," Kirk said briskly. "We have our plans neatly worked out for tomorrow. Er... what time's dinner?"

"In 42 minutes, Captain."

"Then I think that I'll take another turn in the pool," Kirk decided. "Care to join me, Spock? Come on! I'll race you to the waterfall." Without waiting for an answer, he plunged in headfirst to reappear a moment later, grinning and shaking water from his eyes. "Come on in, Spock! The water's fine," he called jokingly.

His First Officer stood hesitating on the edge, then a flash of defiance burned in his eyes. Without more ado he kicked off his sandals, stripped to the skin and letting his clothes slide to the tiles, shot into the pool in a clean headlong dive. McCoy, surprised into hoots of laughter, rose to get a closer look at the contest. All he could make out in the swirls and splashes was Jim's arms ploughing wildly through the water for all he was worth with Spock in hot pursuit and closing in dangerously.

"Look at them! Just like kids," he chortled. "Who would believe those two are Starfleet Command Officers."

A movement behind him made him look round. The ubiquitous Staurak had laid a bathrobe on the seat and was now gathering and carefully folding the clothes that Spock had so casually discarded. The Doctor eyed the placid face and wondered what the Vulcan thought of these antics.

"I'm afraid," he said with a smile, "that the contact with emotional Humans has perverted your Spock, Staurak. Do you find him changed?"

Staurak gazed levelly at McCoy

then at the pool where the two friends were now fooling about under the small cascade. "I am not sure, Doctor McCoy," he said thoughtfully. "Spock is the same and yet he is not."

"But that's illogical, Staurak," McCoy could not resist the remark.

"Yes," Staurak replied quietly, "it is illogical but nevertheless it is a fact. And it may be for the best. At last, Spock looks content. He has found loyal friends." He turned his faded eyes to McCoy. "It is gratifying, and it is logical to approve such a change, isn't it?"

"It certainly is," agreed the Doctor, who was beginning to like the wise old fellow very much indeed.

Chapter 5

T'Pol, regal and enigmatic, was sitting in her ornate armchair and looking appraisingly at the three men in front of her. Outworlders in general were wont to fidget in her presence but, strangely enough, the two Humans were sitting quietly and their gazes did not waver under her penetrating stare.

True, Kirk had to live up to his reputation as the bold Starship Captain. Still, it pleased her to note the open gaze of his hazel eyes, the self-assured yet unaffected demeanour which had already struck her attention during the dramatic circumstances of their first encounter.

McCoy... ah, McCoy. Indeed, he was another matter... an interesting character, a man of contrasts. A healer of great renown and probity, yet capable of deliberate trickery. His eyes, so strangely blue, were looking at her with a curious mixture of defiance and diffidence. Clearly the man was uneasy... and well he

should be! Yes, her duty was to sound out this McCoy; to find out what manner of man he was, and to confirm what she suspected.

As for Spock... she fixed her dark, beady eyes on her grand-nephew and noted with approval his proper Vulcan restraint as he sat gracefully, hands folded in his lap, a composed and expectant expression on his face. Aware of his calm strength, she was relieved that no evil after-effects remained from the fiendish mindprobe he had been subjected to when last on Vulcan. Yes, all seemed to be well now.

T'Pau's visitors, likewise, were discreetly sizing her up. To Kirk's vivid imagination, the old lady looked, with her elaborate hairstyle and jewellery, like some hierarcic idol, aloof and omnipotent. McCoy's thoughts were more commonplace; under the Vulcan's scrutiny his thoughts flew back to his student days when he had stood in trepidation on the carpet of the Principal's office. Spock also felt memories from his youth surge up in his mind. So many of this house; the faint clinging citronella fragrance, the cold marble seats, the stern gaze boring into his eyes, recalled the formal visits with his parents or the painful occasions when she had sent for him to demand explanations for his actions. It seemed to him that T'Pau had always presided over his life, like some omnipresent deity.

The old lady broke the silence and resumed speaking. "So... Captain Kirk appears to be in perfect health. This is satisfying. The skill of his Healer is to be commended. The demise of such a brilliant officer would have been a loss to the Federation."

Jim Kirk, unsure whether she was speaking in earnest or giving vent to subtle Vulcan sarcasm, merely bowed his

head. Spock remained innocently detached and McCoy cleared his throat.

"Vulcan is honoured by your visit, Captain," she continued imperturbably. "I trust that Spock will show you the technological achievements of our people and also the natural beauties of our land."

Spock nodded in assent. "That is indeed my intention, T'Pau."

"Good. It is however regrettable that Sarek was called away on this unexpected mission. Have you heard from your parents, Spock?"

"I have. They called last night. Father said that he could not tell, as yet, when they will be able to return. It seems that the delegates from Tellar are being difficult."

T'Pau raised disparaging eyebrows. "What else can we expect from Tellarite diplomats! They argue for argument's sake. However Sarek knows how to deal with them. Spock, why don't you show Captain Kirk my Shas-a-shar garden? I have a collection of desert plants which might interest you, Kirk. It is said to compare favourably with that of the Academy."

Kirk, although surprised by the proposal, got to his feet and smiled. "I am not, unlike my Chief Helmsman, an expert in botany but I would be very interested, Madam."

T'Pau inclined her head like a benevolent schoolmistress. "Go with Spock; he knows something of botany, he will show you. Afterwards come and join me, in the inner court, for some refreshment."

The Doctor was about to follow when T'Pau raised an imperious hand. "McCoy will stay," she stated majestically.

"We have to talk."

Jim Kirk looked back at McCoy, silently asking if he needed help, but the Doctor just made a wry face and subsided onto his hard marble seat. Kirk walked out close on Spock's heels. He had the distinct impression of having been sent out to play in the garden until tea-time while poor Bones was kept indoors and punished for having been naughty.

Spock, feeling his Captain's concern, paused at the gate. "Jim," he said quietly, "you need not worry for McCoy. I know from experience that his tongue is as biting as that of T'pau."

A smile lit Kirk's face as he followed Spock into the garden. "I guess you're right," he said. "T'pau may well find her match in our Doctor. You know what? I'd give a lot to be a fly on the wall!"

Spock stopped in mid-step on the sandy path. He turned round narrowly missing the prickles of a crimson blooming cactus. "A fly, Captain? Whatever for?"

"So that I could hear everything without being seen. It's just a figure of speech, Spock."

"Oh, I see... like the little mouse in the hole," Spock nodded wisely.

"Mouse in the hole?" his nonplussed Captain repeated.

"Another figure of speech, Jim, which I heard once from an Earther. It means the same thing," Spock explained complacently. "Shall we take a look around?"

"By all means, Science Officer, since I am told you know something of botany. We have our orders, come on!" Kirk, flashing a broad smile, gathered his

Vulcan in tow and strode down the garden path.

Chapter 6

The Vulcan dowager and the C.M.O. were eyeing each other across the room, and the silence was deafening.

"I want some answers, McCoy," T'pau said presently.

"That depends on the questions, Ma'am," McCoy retorted warily.

"Do not prevaricate, Doctor McCoy. You know perfectly well what I mean. At Spock's Koon-ut-kal-if-fee, you declared Captain Kirk dead and had him transported back to your ship. And yet, we heard later that he was alive and well. Therefore I assume that you made use of a subterfuge. Explain!"

McCoy bit his lip, debating with himself, then made his decision. "Explain what? Of course I used a subterfuge. The drug I gave Jim was not a vitalizer but a dose of ronoxiline, a powerful neural paralysar."

T'pau regarded him with a spark of interest in her eyes. "So... that is what it was... a neural paralysar. You deliberately deceived us."

"Sure," McCoy returned heatedly, "and I'm glad I did, otherwise Jim Kirk would not be here today. Believe me, Madam, if it was going to help save a life I wouldn't think twice about using any trick." The Doctor, quite worked up by now, sprang to his feet and paced restlessly round the room, watched in stony silence by the old lady.

Eventually he swung round and faced her again. "Tell me, Madam, what

would you have had me do? Stand by and watch Spock and Kirk cut each other's throats for the sake of that... of that..." Words failed him. "No, Madam, I was not going to stand idly by while my best friends were trapped by some stupid ritual into murdering each other. Those two are friends, as you very well know because I told you so. Their friendship is something unique, and was I going to let it be destroyed? Not on your life! And you? Couldn't you have forbidden that scandalous fight in the first place? Why didn't you? Is that your Vulcan respect for life? Your Vulcan logic? Pah!"

He turned away abruptly and found himself staring out at the rock-garden where, judging by Jim's grinning face, his friends were having a good time as they strolled among the desert shrubs. He suddenly wished he were with them, away from the chilly presence he could sense at his back. T'Pol had wanted answers? Well, she had them now and more than she had bargained for. He sighed and felt curiously drained.

After a moment the cool voice rang clear in the tense silence. "Have you done?" she asked.

McCoy nodded and mumbled, "Sorry. I got carried away."

"That much is obvious." There was a pause. "Come and sit down," ordered the voice.

Startled, the Doctor turned and eyed T'Pol warily but she was her usual aloof self as if his tirade had gone straight over her head. He sat down and waited with mixed feelings. In a way he was glad to have got that off his chest but he was also embarrassed for having let off steam in front of this legend. 'All of Vulcan in one package', as Jim had said. Damn! His, in Spock's parlance, 'emotional display' was not going to improve the reputation of

Humans around here. This was a fine start to their month on Vulcan.

T'Pol broke into his thoughts. "Do not be concerned, McCoy. We Vulcans have long known Humans to be emotional, head-strong and generally ill-mannered creatures, but there is nothing to be done. They are what they are."

"Now look here..." the Doctor sputtered.

"Let me finish," she cut him short peremptorily. "I was about to say that, somehow, these Human feelings are understandable; although the manner in which they are expressed cannot be entirely overlooked. However they denote compassion, generosity and a loyalty to your friends which must be commended. It pleases me that Spock has found kindred spirits in James Kirk and in you, McCoy. Indeed, Spock chose his friends well."

Dumbfounded by this unexpected turn of events McCoy stared at the old Vulcan, whose severe features now held a touch of irony.

"You look surprised," she remarked dryly, "but don't you know that you should never judge by appearances? Contrary to common belief, Vulcans also have compassion, but they are creatures of duty and logic above all else. You taxed me with allowing the combat, with ignoring Spock's entreaties, didn't you?"

McCoy nodded, tongue-tied.

"There is a fact which you outworlders must understand; since time immemorial Vulcans have followed laws and traditions that cannot be ignored or altered. I once heard a Terran official declare that laws were made to be broken; on Earth, perhaps, but not on Vulcan. Our ancient customs must be observed,



whatever the cost.

"The regrettable turn of events at Spock's Koon-ut-kal-if-fee is but one instance of this absolute rule. Contrary to all expectations, T'Pring chose both the challenge and Kirk as her Champion. That was her right. I expected Kirk to refuse but, to my regret, he did not. Once he had accepted the challenge nothing could be done. I may have some influence on this world but where our ancient laws are concerned I am powerless and that fact is known and accepted by Spock, as by any Vulcan. Do you understand, Doctor McCoy?"

The Doctor nodded again, moved by her quiet dignity. Throughout the Federation she was known as T'Pau, the indomitable guardian of the Tradition, but McCoy saw in front of him now a frail, aged woman bound by archaic customs and concerned by their eventual implications.

"However," T'Pau went on serenely, "in this provoking situation an unforeseen element proved to be most opportune for my purpose; you, Doctor McCoy."

"Me?" McCoy blinked, nonplussed.

"You indeed. For all its disturbing emotions, I was pleased to find your mind so easily open to suggestion."

"What do you mean, 'open to suggestion'?" he asked uneasily.

"Has it not occurred to you that the idea you had of saving your Captain by means of your medical knowledge may not have been entirely yours?" she asked with a pointed look.

McCoy's blue eyes looked blank, then widened in dawning comprehension and finally blazed with outrage. "Do you

mean to say that I injected Kirk with a paralysing instead of a stimulant because you planted the suggestion in my mind? That's preposterous."

"I did not suggest the neural paralysing," T'Pau pointed out coolly. "I know little of medical matters. I merely suggested some means of disabling Kirk and simulating his death for as long as was necessary. You found the answer and acted with commendable speed and efficiency."

"But it's impossible," McCoy protested. "I mean, I felt nothing, no mind touch..."

"My skill would be defective indeed, if you had," she replied dryly.

"Well... I'll be damned." The Doctor sat dumbfounded, then all of a sudden a notion struck him. "I say... what about those famous ethics that Spock trots out all the time? You reached into my mind and made use of it without so much as a by-your-leave. Where was the Vulcan respect for privacy?"

"Granted, McCoy, but logic dictates that desperate situations call for desperate measures and you did say, a while ago, that you would go to any lengths to save a life. Be logical, Doctor."

Somewhat disgruntled McCoy said with a crooked grin, "I might have known you'd bring in logic as justification. That's what Spock does all the time! He has a knack for finding the best logical reasons for embarking on the most outrageous stunts."

"Indeed? Interesting." Actually T'Pau was more than interested, she was pleased. Her conversation with this emotional Human, whom she could read like a book, had proved most rewarding. Not only had it confirmed her favourable

impression of Spock's friends but it also revealed fascinating traits of his character and showed his dual nature in a new light.

McCoy had been the perfect, even though unknowing, executor of her ruse and she had owed it to him to tell him the truth. Now she had to make sure that he kept it to himself. So she resumed, "You must understand, Doctor, that what I have told you is strictly confidential and must remain a secret between us. All that anyone else needs to know is that your ingenuity caused you to take prompt though unorthodox action that saved two lives."

"Two? I'm afraid I don't follow you," a puzzled McCoy said.

"You surprise me. If Kirk had actually died, do you think that Spock would have survived his friend? How little you know him, Doctor."

"Spock? But... he wouldn't have... I mean Vulcans don't commit suicide... or do they?"

T'Pol regarded him with brooding eyes. "They do not," she replied grimly, "but under certain circumstances, Vulcans are quite capable of shutting down their metabolic functions. They simply cease to exist."

"Oh, my God!" the Doctor whispered. He shivered. "You mean that Spock would have turned himself off?"

She nodded. "Crudely expressed, but accurate. I knew what he had in mind when he took his leave. In response to my ritual salute, 'Live long and prosper', he replied, 'I shall do neither. I have killed my Captain and my friend.'"

"Spock said that?" McCoy was moved. He recalled the tragic but

determined expression Spock's face had worn when he had entered Sickbay and spoken of turning himself over to the authorities. Thank goodness Jim had been alive and well and... something McCoy would never forget... at the shock, the Vulcan had broken into that incredible, dazzling smile. T'Pol, who had been observing McCoy's expressive face with interest, remarked, "I see that you now realise the full impact of your action, Doctor."

"Yeah... lots of things are clearer... and you were right," McCoy conceded. "That suggestion of yours was the logical thing... all in a good cause. I appreciate you telling me... but there is one point, though... er... may I speak openly?"

There was a touch of sarcasm in T'Pol's voice as she said, "I was not aware that you needed my leave to do so, Doctor."

He had the grace to blush. "Sorry, but as my friends could tell you, I've never been one to mince my words. One thing I don't understand; how come highly civilised, rational Vulcans still find these bloody rituals, these combats to the death, acceptable? Sheer waste of lives, if you ask me."

"Spoken like a healer and a Human healer at that," T'Pol said dryly. "You must know that tradition forms the backbone of any community. Your own planet retains its ancient customs and culture. Vulcans only do the same as you."

"Agreed, but we have abolished many barbarous customs. Why can't you?"

"It is impossible. There are too many factors involved. The influence of some ancient families and traditional brotherhoods is still too strong to allow

consideration of any innovations for the present. It is possible, however, that future generations will bring about some changes in our ways."

"Is that so? Well, I wish them luck," McCoy commented. "In the meantime there are some people, like T'Pring and her mate, who know how to use your traditions to their own advantage."

T'Pau studied him with her keen gaze. "For a Human you do not lack perception," she remarked, rising from her chair. "There are indeed such people who plan and scheme and sometimes over-reach themselves. T'Pring's guile lead her finally to the status of chattel. She rejected Spock; she wanted Stonn; she is now his property."

"Well, she had only herself to blame," McCoy said as he followed his hostess, "but I rather suspect somehow that it might be the other way round. That girl didn't look to me to be the submissive type."

He was favoured by a sharp look. "You may be right, McCoy," she said.

"By the way," he said conversationally, "did you know that they're on Vulcan right now?"

She paused. "Are they? How do you know?"

"We saw Stonn, three days ago, on the orbital station."

"That is unfortunate," T'Pau declared, deep in thought. Then she walked on, saying briskly, "Come, let us have refreshment."

Kirk came back from T'Pau's garden hot, thirsty and feeling that he had seen enough cacti and succulents to last him a life-time. When Spock ushered him into

the cool patio that was common to all houses in ShiKahr he let out a sigh of relief. As they turned the corner he halted in his tracks so abruptly that Spock all but collided with him.

"Spock," Kirk hissed over his shoulder, "do you see what I see?"

"I do, Captain," the deep voice murmured in his ear, "and I find it most interesting. 'Scared stiff' indeed."

Kirk stifled a giggle. "Did you say interesting, Mr Spock? I would say unbelievable."

"Oh.. there you are, you two," McCoy called as he caught sight of them. "What have you been up to? Get lost in the garden?" The Doctor was sitting at ease in the shade, a cold drink in one hand and a piece of cake in the other. On his right, T'Pau presided over a table loaded with Vulcan delicacies while pots of tea and fruit juice were brought in by a young shy-looking maid.

The two friends exchanged a look of amusement and joined the party. They had hardly sat down when they were offered food and drink by the girl, who had obviously received specific instructions regarding the visitors' sustenance. Kirk, surprised by the copious fare, stole a sideways glance at Spock, who replied with a perplexed eyebrow.

Contrary to their expectations T'Pau's K'Has'Krut was more than a simple snack. Did she believe that Humans needed to be well-fed in order to survive on Vulcan? Whatever the reason these Humans set about doing full justice to the collation. To Spock's secret amazement, T'Pau was revealed as a perfectly attentive hostess and Jim and McCoy looked like they were 'having a good time'... fascinating!

Chapter 7

Jim Kirk gave an appreciative glance around the restaurant, taking in the elegant decoration, the flowers, the profusion of glass and silver-ware. He sat back in his chair, eyes sparkling with the eager anticipation of a little boy ready for a treat.

"This is a beautiful place, Spock," he smiled.

Spock regarded him with a smile of his own. "I am pleased that this pleases you, Jim. I thought it might be to your liking. You will find that the cuisine is on a par with the decor."

"You make my mouth water." Kirk opened the four-page menu and his eyes widened as he ran down the list. "Look at this, Bones. That's what I call a stylish menu."

"I am looking, Jim," was McCoy's sarcastic reply, "and I'm damned if I can understand a word of these fancy French names."

Spock looked up with a pained expression on his face. "Try the next page, Doctor," he recommended.

McCoy turned a page and scoffed, "Fat lot of good that is, Spock. I haven't yet got to the point of reading Vulcanur."

"That is the vegetarian menu you are looking at. Try further on," Spock patiently replied.

"Will you stop grouching, Bones," Kirk laughed, "and look at the back. It's in Standard. You'd better make up your mind, the Maitre d' is coming our way." And indeed, a portly, solemn-looking Vulcan was gliding towards their table, note-pad in hand.

After the menu had been discussed at length and the meal finally selected the long-suffering Maitre d' departed, leaving the three men with a drink of K'vass.

"You know," McCoy said, with a comprehensive glance around the diners who numbered about as many Vulcans as aliens, "what beats me is finding this kind of establishment here."

"Why?" Spock asked. "You do not lack exotic restaurants on Terra, so why be surprised at one on Vulcan?"

"That's the point, Spock. Rightly or wrongly, Vulcans have a reputation for their austere way of life. And with you, and you're not exactly known as an Epicurean, for reference... I did not imagine that your people would be found indulging in such vulgar pleasures as eating and drinking. It's not that I don't appreciate the vegetarian meals that T'Mina has been cooking but I'm talking about Taillevent. Somehow Vulcans and French gastronomy don't mix."

Spock assumed his air of pedagogic aloofness. "Your assertion proves that you are labouring under a misapprehension, Doctor. Vulcans, as you must be aware, have a well-developed perception of beauty and perfection, and we appreciate whatever attains that standard. Chef-d'oeuvres can be found in all fields of study. I once read that gastronomy brought to perfection is a fine art in its own right. It is therefore logical for perfection-seeking Vulcans to frequent this temple of gastronomy."

"You high-browed, pompous ass," McCoy exclaimed. "Why don't you give up your damned logic and admit that Vulcans enjoy good food like the rest of us? What's wrong with doing that, anyway?"

"Gentlemen," Kirk intervened, "I

don't like to interrupt this discussion but need I remind you that we can be overheard."

"Not so, Captain. I activated the sound-screen when we came in." Spock sounded quite smug about it.

"A sound-screen? Where?" McCoy demanded.

Spock pointed at a small switch cleverly concealed by the flowers in the centre-piece. "A simple means of keeping conversations private," he explained. "This device dampens or scrambles voices at will."

The Captain and the Doctor shared a grin. "How about that," the latter marvelled. "Trust the Vulcans to come up with high tech gadgetry to protect their blessed privacy. And I'll bet it's put to its full use somewhere like this."

"Indeed. Particularly when there are uncontrollable Humans around. Thanks to this gadget, Doctor, our neighbours are spared the full brunt of your emotional outbursts."

"Look here, you computerised pixie," McCoy flared, "I'll have you know..."

"Gentlemen," Kirk cut in again. "Gentlemen, I think we are about to be served....," and he nodded in the direction of the Head Waiter who was approaching their table with three assistants in tow.

As soon as the waiters removed the covers the food looked and smelt so delectable that all discussion was forgotten. The Maitre d' filled their glasses with a vintage wine, then with a slight bow, took himself and his underlings off. The first course was savoured in an appreciative silence, punctuated only by appropriate noises of

satisfaction from the Humans.

As Spock finished his soup he said, "Gentlemen, would you excuse me? Someone with whom I should speak has just come in. I won't be a moment." Kirk smiled his assent and Spock rose to his feet and made his way across the room. They saw him speak to a thin-looking man who looked pleased at the encounter, and this drew from McCoy the remark, "Met a friend apparently. Funny - I always thought that Spock was ostracized on Vulcan for being half-Human."

"They've probably changed their minds... and not before time," Kirk replied with a grin. "What do you think of your entree, Bones? And of the wine?"

The Doctor sipped some of the wine and smacked his lips. "This Meursault is fabulous. Spock was right, bless him. Cuisine of this quality is nothing short of perfection."

"Yes, the Taillevent is quite a place. No wonder it's so busy. This must be their usual lunchtime, people are still coming in," Kirk commented, looking around with idle interest. "And I have to admit that Vulcan's reputation is not over-rated. They really are a good-looking people and some of the women are stunning, aren't they, Bones?"

"Agreed. Too bad they don't smile, though. That would add a lot to their charm."

"Yes, it's a pity," Kirk agreed, "but one can't have everything, and... " He broke off with a gasp, then said tightly, "Bones! Look at that girl in the pink suit with two other women, by that palm tree... Isn't that...?"

"You're damned right. That's T'Pring all right," drawled McCoy.

"Hasn't changed a bit... still as beautiful and proud as Lucifer. Changed her hairstyle, though."

"You remember that, Bones?" Kirk was amused.

"Sure, Jim. Trust my memory. I wonder what she's doing here? I mean, Taillevent doesn't seem to be the kind of place she would favour."

"Maybe she's also looking for perfection," Kirk suggested jokingly.

"If she is," the Doctor rejoined caustically, "it obviously isn't in French cuisine but rather in live, handsome manhood."

"Bones! How can you be so trite?" Kirk protested with a laugh.

"Trite, am I? Look at her, Jim. Look at the way she's watching Spock."

"That's right," Kirk said wonderingly. "A regular examination. I don't like that, Bones. There's something disquieting, even predatory, about her."

"I told you, Jim. I always thought she was a dangerous woman. I wouldn't trust her an inch. Oh, damn. Here comes Spock. He's bound to pass by their table... Now, watch."

The two men looked on uneasily as their Vulcan friend walked towards them unaware of the three women watching him like so many hawks. As he drew level with them and caught sight of T'Pring he paused for a brief frosty second. Then, inclining his head with superbly detached indifference he coolly walked on.

"Well done, Spock. A beautiful Vulcan act," Kirk approved quietly.

"Yeah. Very neat. That's the way to treat the girls who let you down," the Doctor muttered as Spock, his face an unreadable mask, joined them and wordlessly took his place.

As the waiters were bringing the next course, comments were superfluous and the Humans merely gave Spock knowing smiles which were received with the flicker of an eyebrow. Once Kirk and McCoy were half-way through their tournedos Rossini, however, conversation was resumed and Spock, while savouring a vegetable souffle, told his friends who he had been talking to.

"Professor Stolar?" Kirk commented. "Isn't he the biologist who worked with Professor Delvaux?"

"The same, Captain. He has informed me that their research has met with complete success. His Department will publish those results that are not classified in the Academy journal."

"That's interesting," McCoy put in. "I hope they'll issue an edition in Standard. I'm curious to see what's come out of the secret research that nearly cost you your life and sanity, Spock."

"No need to wait for the publication, Doctor. When told that you were in ShiKahr, Professor Stolar said that he would be honoured to show you his labs and introduce members of his team to you. He seems to appreciate your work and publications."

McCoy flushed with pleasure. "Oh, does he? That's very flattering. I would certainly like to visit his labs if it's possible."

"It is," Spock replied. "We only have to fix an appointment."

Kirk lifted a finger. "May I be

included in the tour?" he asked. "I'm not an expert like you two, but the Vulcan Science Academy has such a reputation... and I'd like to see where my Science Officer had his training," he added with a mischievous look at Spock, who primly replied, "That was my intention, Captain."

"Thank you, Spock. Now on to a less pleasant matter. As you see my apprehensions about seeing T'Pring on Vulcan were justified. Sheer bad luck, but the question is, what do we do about it?"

"Captain?" Spock looked puzzled. "I do not understand. There is nothing we can do."

"Granted, but we are new on Vulcan, Spock. We don't know how to conform with Vulcan etiquette in this case. If we come across T'Pring and consort, do we acknowledge them, or ignore them?"

"It will depend on the circumstances, Jim," Spock replied non-committally.

"Personally, I'm all for ignoring them," the Doctor interjected, "and I refuse to have my gourmet lunch spoiled by that damned girl. Now how about some dessert?"

The red globe of Eridani was descending towards the horizon, setting everything aglow, when Spock brought his friends home. Although tired and ready for a drink McCoy and Kirk were quite pleased both with their day out and their shopping in ShiKahr, and neither of them could get over the beauty of the garden-city alive as it was with fountains and birds.

As they walked in the shade of sweet-smelling trees near to Sarek's

home, McCoy remarked, "One thing amazes me in this place; trees, flowers, fountains everywhere; I never expected to see so much water around here."

"ShiKahr is an oasis, Doctor," Spock reminded him. "It is one of the few sites in this desert where water rises to the surface."

"And your people surely know how to make the most of it," Kirk commented. "Your hometown is remarkably..." A sudden roar cut him short and a crash had the three men whip round in time to see a huge, furry creature vault over a gate and trot ponderously in their direction.

"Good Heavens," the Doctor stared, frozen to the spot. "What the hell is that?"

"That is a pet which, if I am not mistaken, has just broken out," Spock said in mild amusement.

"Are you kidding? A pet? With those fangs?" McCoy protested, "And what are we supposed to do now?" he added nervously, since Spock looked like waiting calmly for the assault.

"Isn't that one of your famous sehlat, Spock?" Kirk enquired. "A beautiful beast, but... Spock... look out!"

Too late. The animal rushed at Spock and standing on its hind legs let its enormous paws fall on his shoulders in a formidable bear hug. Anyone but a Vulcan would have collapsed under the crushing weight but Spock didn't seem in the least affected and he even suffered his face to be washed by the raspy tongue of the beast. Then pushing the big muzzle away he explained quietly.

"There is nothing to worry about, Captain. Cham is perfectly harmless, if not fully trained yet."

The sehlat, purring with satisfaction, dropped on to its paws and rubbed its maned head against Spock's legs. The Captain held out a cautious hand and patted Cham's brow, who purred louder than ever.

"Fancy," said McCoy. "It sure likes to be fondled and it apparently knows you, Spock. But isn't it dangerous to let that animal roam around the streets? How come its owner lets it loose?"

"Owners, Doctor," Spock specified, "and I believe that they are not far away."

Sure enough the voices of children and the patter of small sandalled feet on the path heralded the arrival of a boy and a little girl, who ran up to them and halted breathlessly in front of Spock. At once the girl took possession of the sehlat by throwing her arms around its neck and burying her face in its mane. The boy fixed his eyes on Spock and delivered the ritual greeting with solemn formality. Spock replied likewise and lightly touched the temple of the child, whose eyes sparkled with ill-concealed excitement. None of this was lost on Kirk or McCoy, who stood apart and watched the scene with curiosity.

The brief mind-touch over Spock said, "Jim, Doctor. Allow me to introduce our young neighbours, Serik and T'Chal. Come, children, make your salutation to Captain Kirk and Doctor McCoy."

"Captain Kirk? Of the Enterprise?" The children's eyes widened in awe.

"The same; and Doctor McCoy," Spock prompted.

Serik, recalling his manners, took a deep breath and intoned in perfect Standard, "Captain, Doctor, Vulcan is honoured by your presence."

A look from Spock caused him to add, "We come to serve." A nod of approval from the Vulcan followed.

Kirk, amused by the charming formality of the child, produced his warmest smile. "Thank you, Serik. I am very pleased to meet you and so is McCoy," he added with a nudge at the Doctor who was obviously fascinated by the big sehlat and the tiny girl hugging each other.

"What? said McCoy. "Oh sure, very glad to meet you, my boy, but is that your sister? Is she safe in the clutches of that beast?"

"Perfectly, Doctor," Spock assured him. "She is more secure with her pet than anywhere else. Sehlat are the best protectors of children, and I speak from experience."

"That's right, I remember now," McCoy exclaimed. "Your mother told us about your pet. Like an oversized teddy bear, she said. So that was a sehlat, was it?"

"Yes, sir. It was bigger than Cham and its name was I'Chaya," Serik proudly informed them.

"And how come you are so well-informed, young man?" Kirk asked with a grin.

"Commander Spock told us about I'Chaya and about the Enterprise," the boy replied.

"And also about Kirk and M'Koy," said a shrill little voice, and T'Chal peeped shyly around her brother.

"Is that so?" said McCoy, glancing suspiciously at the First Officer, who had assumed his air of studied innocence. Then looking down at the child the

Doctor noted her round eyes, her chubby face framed by delicate pointed ears and her cute ponytail, and couldn't resist. He hunkered down in front of her and declared, "Aren't you a pretty little lady." At her solemn stare he added with a reassuring grin, "Hi there, T'Chal."

A pause followed as she regarded him uncertainly, then suddenly a sweet smile lit her face and she piped, "Hi there, M'Koy."

"You darling," McCoy cried delightedly. "She smiled, she actually smiled. Did you see that, Spock?"

"I did, Doctor," Spock answered curtly, "and I recommend that you refrain from further exerting your pernicious influence on that child."

"What the hell!" McCoy retorted, clambering to his feet. "Pernicious influence? You can't be serious?"

There was no doubt about it as Spock stiffly replied, "I was never more so, Doctor. T'Chal is of the age when Vulcan children are taught how to control their emotions. Believe me, the disciplines they undergo are arduous enough without external factors compromising the course of their initiation."

"Also spoken from experience, Spock?" Kirk asked quietly.

His First Officer swallowed and nodded. "Yes, Jim," he replied tightly. "A child of her age is very receptive and easily influenced. Her response to McCoy's greeting proves that and I don't want any control she may already have achieved undone by her exposure to emotional onslaughts. You do understand?"

"Quite, Mr Spock. From now on we

shall do our best not to upset Vulcan's system of education," Kirk promised. "Won't we, Bones?"

"Okay, I get your point," the Doctor grumbled. "I'll hold my tongue in the future, but let me tell you this, Spock. It's a damn shame to deprive these kids of their childhood. At their age it's normal for children to laugh, play, have a good time. But you logical Vulcans have them suppress their natural joie de vivre with the fine result that you turn their lives into a crashing bore!"

Spock favoured him with a long-suffering look. "I wonder when you will admit, McCoy, that the Human concept of having a good time is not necessarily that of other cultures." Then with a kind glance at the children who were watching them in silent fascination he said, "I think that it is time to take your sehlat home, Serik."

"Yes, Commander. May we come some time... for more stories?" the boy added shyly.

"You may." Spock nodded in assent.

The children's faces lit up with obvious pleasure then Serik hoisted his sister onto the sehlat's back. He climbed up behind her and after a formal salute kicked the heavy animal into motion. Much amused, the Humans watched them amble sedately up the street and disappear from view at the garden gate.

"It sure has to be seen to be believed," the Doctor declared. "That sehlat is as tame as a dog with those kids. Did you do that with yours?"

"Of course, Doctor. I'Chaya always carried me home after a day out in the desert," Spock blandly replied and he started on down the street.

"Can you imagine that, Jim? Spock riding a sehlat... that must have been a sight to behold." McCoy chuckled all the way back to the house.

It was not until after dinner that Spock broached a subject that he was keen on, although he was uncertain as to how his guests would receive his proposal. The trio was sitting under the blooms of the bower-vine and enjoying the cool evening breeze. With glasses of K'Vass in their hands Kirk and the Doctor were lounging in a pleasant euphoria induced by the strong drink and the soothing wash of sound from the Vulcan harp. As the final flourished ripple of arpeggios swept from Spock's fingers Jim Kirk breathed a sigh of sheer contentment.

"That was delightful, Spock. Just the kind of music I like. Cool, relaxing, a perfect conclusion to an enjoyable day. Don't you agree, Bones?"

"Huh?" McCoy emerged from his reverie. "Sorry, Jim... I'm afraid I was daydreaming. That lyre of Spock's has the knack of sending me off wandering in an euphoric state of mind... Quite a pleasant sensation, actually," he said and drained his glass.

"Really? I am flattered, Doctor."

Was that sarcasm that McCoy detected in Spock's tone? He replied in good humour, "And well you might be, Mr Spock! It's not everyone who can do that. Not that I wasn't listening, mind you. I particularly liked that last piece with the tinkling notes. Very nice. What was that? One of your improvisations?"

"No, Doctor. It is a ballad by a contemporary musician who ranks as one of our best composers."

"Is that so?" Kirk sounded mildly

interested. "Contemporary, you say? A Vulcan?"

"Yes, Captain. She is a composer, a music teacher at the Academy and also a soloist for the ShiKahr Philharmonic Orchestra."

"Oh, a woman composer. That's interesting," the Captain commented.

"Incidentally," Spock resumed after a pause, "the orchestra is giving a concert to-morrow evening, and... I thought that... perhaps you might be interested..." Spock's voice trailed off casually as his fingers brushed the strings, but his apparent indifference did not fool his Captain one little bit.

Turning a searching eye on his friend Kirk met the intense gaze fixed on him and knew at once how much his response meant to the Vulcan. "That's a splendid idea, Spock. What do you say, Bones? Care to come with us?"

"Well," the Doctor sounded doubtful. "I don't know... A whole concert of Vulcan music? I'm not sure I could cope."

"Do not worry, McCoy. The programme includes Vulcan, Terran and Rigellian pieces."

"Oh? Sounds interesting; and that musician of yours... is she performing to-morrow?"

"Certainly. In Mozart's Concerto for Flute and Harp."

"Mozart? Mozart on Vulcan? That I would like to hear. Okay, you can count me in - and what about some supper afterwards? In a nice little place somewhere... What do you think?"

"Agreed, Doctor."

"That sounds great, Bones."

"That's a deal, then." McCoy stifled a yawn and stood up. "I don't know about you two but what I need now is my bed. It's been a busy day and there's more to come tomorrow. Mind if I turn in?"

They walked back to the house in companionable silence, giving a last look at the brilliant darkness of the galaxy spanning over their heads before turning in.

Chapter 8

The ShiKahr Concert Hall was a handsome example of classic Vulcan architecture, a clever combination of granite, marble and precious woods. Spock had managed to secure three central seats about halfway up, and as there were still some minutes to spare, Kirk and the Doctor gave free rein to their curiosity. They were struck by the hush reigning under the lofty vaulted ceiling despite the concourse of people. Tier after tier was filling up with hardly a murmur and conversations were held in low voices.

Looking down at the circular stage they noticed quite a few familiar looking instruments but most looked very alien, and these stirred McCoy's curiosity.

"Spock," he said in an undertone, "those instruments down there... they are indigenous to Vulcan, I suppose?"

"Correct, Doctor."

"Then, how can they play Mozart with them?"

"Simple, Doctor," the Vulcan replied patiently. "Have you never heard of transcriptions? All they have to do is to

adapt the alien orchestration to Vulcan instruments. The result is quite effective, as you will hear in a few minutes."

McCoy looked sceptical, but his attention was caught by Kirk who nudged him and whispered, "Look down to the right, second row... that woman in white and blue... Isn't she the Healer we met this morning?"

McCoy craned his neck then sat back with a nod. "Yes, that's her... A remarkable woman. What's her name? ...T'Ra ...T'La...?"

"T'Lian, Senior Healer of the Academy Healing Centre," Spock reminded them.

"That's it. T'Lian," McCoy said happily. "Do you know she invited me to visit her clinic? I'd like to go one of these days."

"Well, we can drop you there on our way to the gymnasium," Kirk offered. "Spock promised to introduce me to the secrets of Vulcan martial arts."

"Good Lord! We'd better have an intensive care unit ready for you, Jim," McCoy retorted.

"I assure you that Jim will come to no harm, McCoy," Spock protested.

"Sure? That remains to be seen." McCoy flashed a crooked grin.

Meantime, the house lights had gradually dimmed and now spotlights sprang into life and focused on the stage, leaving the audience in semi-darkness. An expectant hush fell over the hall and all attention turned to the floodlit stage, except for one pair of watchful eyes which had been observing the Starfleet Officers and remained fixed on Spock.

In silence, the 95 musicians filed in and gathered their instruments before taking their places in the successive circles forming around the centre of the stage, which was inlaid with the IDIC symbol. While they tuned their instruments Kirk's attention was caught by some inscriptions flashing on the walls both to the right and left.

"What do you think that means?" McCoy muttered in his ear.

"No idea," he replied. They soon got their answer as the Vulcan script blinked out to be replaced by Standard characters and they realised that it was the programme for the concert. It was a very eclectic programme, including works of Terran, Vegan, Rigellian and of course Vulcan composers.

This all looked promising but one thing greatly puzzled the Captain. After a short moment of silence while the orchestra sat in total concentration they now prepared to strike up the first piece and there was still no conductor in sight. Spock, sensing his perplexity, murmured in his ear, "Captain, a Vulcan orchestra does not need a conductor."

"!...?"

"One of the advantages of being telepathic." There definitely was a trace of a smile tugging at the corner of Spock's mouth. Kirk chuckled softly, "Of course. I should have guessed." The two friends shared the same amused thought even as the first chords of the concerto were being struck and the stream of harmony swept over them.

Four hours later when the Captain and the Doctor emerged from the concert hall in Spock's wake they moved dazedly along with the orderly crowd. They

finally surfaced in the foyer with a drink in their hands. A few sips brought them back to the present and to the pair of dark, quizzical eyes watching them.

"Phew," Kirk produced a weak smile and drained his glass. "That was quite an experience."

"It sure was," the Doctor concurred with feeling. "That was beautiful but, my word, I have never had so much music crammed into one sitting." Then showing his empty glass he added, "I think we need another one, please."

The Vulcan made a sign and more drinks were immediately served by the ubiquitous waiters. While they savoured their refreshment the Humans took the time to look around the lofty room which opened onto a portico and the starry night, and to observe the local people who were standing or moving about engaged in quiet conversation.

Kirk could not fail to notice that he and McCoy were being observed with covert interest, but besides exchanging polite nods of courtesy with Spock, the Vulcans stood tactfully apart. Then some people just coming in caught his attention.

"Spock," he said, "aren't those people the musicians?"

"Yes, Captain. It is one of our customs. After a performance the artists come and join the audience for refreshments and to exchange comments about the performance. Thus the audience can express their opinion, be it criticism or praise."

"I think that's a good idea," McCoy declared. "Since you Vulcans do not clap or boo then that's the only way you can say if you are satisfied or not."

"Precisely, Doctor. It is a more civilised way."

"Well, Mr Spock, for once I'm inclined to agree with you." McCoy gave him one of his wicked grins. "And I wouldn't mind meeting that lovely harpist who played the solo in the concerto and in that piece with the strings... er...?"

"Respighi? The Fountains of Rome?" offered Spock.

"No, not Respighi. I mean that last piece with the flute and harps, by that Vulcan composer... do you know what I mean?"

"The Variations on a Ni-Var theme by T'Kahalin, Doctor," Spock said.

"Yes. The Variations... beautiful. And the harpist... superb."

"Not surprising since she is the composer," a deadpan Spock revealed.

"That young woman? She's the musician you told us about?"

"Absolutely, Doctor," Spock nodded while his eyes roved about as if looking for something or someone.

"Well, all the more reason to meet her, especially as it is the custom here." McCoy sounded quite enthusiastic.

"You seem quite taken with the lady, Bones," Kirk teased. "Seriously, Spock, do you know her? Do you think we could be introduced? Spock? Mr Spock?"

Actually Spock was not paying any attention to them. He was standing stock still; his dark eyes, burning with a strange inner fire, were staring over Kirk's shoulder as if drawn by an irresistible

magnet. Something about him, some underlying expectation, aroused the curiosity of his friends and made them turn round to find the cause. They followed the direction of his gaze and among the crowd a lovely face suddenly emerged; a face that was looking their way and as far as they could see one whose breathless expectancy mirrored Spock's.

One experienced glance at the graceful figure sufficed for Jim Kirk to identify the person. He touched Spock's arm and said under his breath, "Spock ...is that the lady?"

Slowly, as if emerging from a dream, the Vulcan turned his attention back to his Captain. "Yes, Jim. That is she ...that is T'Kahalin," he replied. At the tone of his voice the others exchanged a glance. Quite intrigued they saw Spock look down the hall again, hesitate, then with a curt, "Come," he strode purposefully in her direction. The Doctor raised an eyebrow at the Captain.

"He knows the lady, Jim. No doubt about that. Come on."

They made their way across the crowded foyer in Spock's wake. By the time the encounter took place Spock had regained full control of himself and no Vulcan could have found fault with his impeccable greeting and the similarly correct introduction he made for his friends.

T'Kahalin, likewise, after her first shock of surprise had regained her poise and introduced her companions with a charming formality. When she presented a middle-aged lady as T'Lian, her mother's sister, however, the latter said pleasantly, "We have met before, T'Kal. Doctor McCoy and Captain Kirk visited Stolar's Department this very morning. I trust that the visit was of interest?" she

asked the Humans.

"Very much so, Doctor. We were very impressed indeed," McCoy declared with his southern courtesy, "and so are we tonight with your orchestra, Madam. You gave us a very enjoyable concert."

"I am honoured, Doctor McCoy," T'Kahalin replied softly. The faint blush on her cheeks added so much charm to her delicate beauty that McCoy and Kirk fell at once under her spell. The Captain, with his vast experience of females, lost no time in turning on his charm and soon engaged the Vulcans in a general conversation, all the while very much aware of the watchful presence of his First Officer standing at parade rest with his hands locked behind his back.

Presently McCoy proposed drinks for everyone. Spock suggested the terrace and the small group moved to the doors. T'Lian and McCoy led the way, talking shop with her fellow scientists. As T'Kahalin, escorted by the two Command Officers of the Enterprise, brought up the rear, Spock met the twinkling eyes of his Captain with equanimity and responded with a silent caution.

/Better not overdo it, Captain./

A sparkle of merriment touched his mind. */But she is so charming; so incredibly attractive, Spock, and she has the most bewitching eyes./*

/Very true. Nevertheless flattery will get you nowhere with a Vulcan female,/ came the firm reply.

/Come on, you killjoy. Don't spoil my pleasure - or could it be that you're jealous, Mr Spock?/

/Impossible, Jim. Jealousy does not number among a Vulcan's shortcomings/

There was definitely self-righteousness in Spock's tone of voice.

/That's what you think, my friend, but do I not detect a certain degree of annoyance which might well pass for jealousy... or am I mistaken?/

Kirk's teasing was interrupted abruptly as an elegant young woman stepped across their path and brought them to a halt. Her cool voice said, "T'Kahalin, allow me to add my small contribution to the well-deserved compliments which have already come your way. Your performance tonight was indeed praiseworthy."

"You are most kind, T'Pring," T'Kahalin replied, cool and self-possessed. "I am pleased that my efforts meet with your approval."

"They do indeed, but I do not wish to interrupt." T'Pring's cold eyes swept over the two men, lingered on Spock with a subtle, calculating look, then came back to Kirk.

"Captain Kirk, I presume? We are honoured to see you back on Vulcan and apparently in perfect health."

Kirk impassive as any Vulcan, bowed stiffly. "Madam..." he murmured, thinking */No thanks to you!/*.

T'Pring turned to the Vulcan. "Spock..." Her mouth savoured the name like a delicacy while her dark eyes glinted, flint-hard. "Spock, I must beg the favour of a private conversation... for a matter of the utmost importance."

"This is hardly an appropriate time or place, T'Pring," Spock replied calmly, his expression chillingly remote.

She eyed him challengingly, was favoured with an impassive stare and

said loftily, "Agreed, Spock. Nevertheless a meeting is necessary, soon. Kindly keep this in mind."

"I will," he replied curtly, bowing slightly.

Apparently satisfied, T'Pring inclined her head. "We shall meet again, then." Raising her hand she included all three in her farewell then holding her head high and proud she turned away and disappeared in the crowded room.

The unexpected encounter cast a chill on the trio. Kirk glanced at his friend in concern, suspecting embarrassment behind the unreadable mask. The lady too seemed upset. She was standing aloof, apparently unconcerned and glancing with studious indifference over the assembly, but Kirk could tell by her tightly-gripped hands that she had been shocked by T'Pring's lack of discretion.

Spock looked at her and his heart sank. He knew it was illogical but he could not help but feel responsible for the awkward situation. "T'Kahalin," he said in a low voice, "I beg you to accept my apologies for that unwarranted intrusion. It was unacceptable and I regret that..." His voice faltered; he paused, breathless, and stared as though taken captive by the luminous golden-green eyes gazing up at him. Kirk, an interested onlooker, had the impression that for all the crowded room the two were alone in silent world of their own.

Despite their cool restraint the two Vulcans contrived to express in their locked gazes feelings so deep and private that Jim Kirk was moved and even awed by the intensity of their auras. He wistfully thought that he would give a lot to see those marvellous green eyes look at him as they now looked at Spock in this strange spiritual communion.

A sigh escaped T'Kahalin's lips and she spoke at last. "No apology is needed, Commander. The incident was immaterial and is best forgotten." Spock inclined his head gratefully. "Perhaps we should join our companions?" she suggested with a graceful tilt of her head and a glance at Kirk.

"Certainly," he smiled, "before they start wondering what's happened to us."

If the Vulcans had speculated about the delay, they naturally did not say so and greeted them with composure. McCoy, on the other hand, did wonder and said so. A warning look from Kirk gave him the hint and he created a diversion by offering another round of drinks. The conversation resumed and proved to be so entertaining that McCoy's curiosity was not satisfied until much later that night.

When the trio got back home in the small hours Kirk and McCoy both felt that Spock needed to be alone and went straight to their rooms. The Doctor, determined to get to the bottom of the matter, followed Kirk to his room, plonked himself down into a chair and declared, "Now, Jim. Out with it! What kept you so long, back there in the theatre?"

Kirk took a few turns round the room before facing the Doctor. "T'Pring," he said briefly.

"Damn. T'Pring again, eh? I wondered why Spock looked so distracted at times. And then, what?"

While Kirk was explaining the situation, their Vulcan friend was also trying to assess the recent turn of events. After bidding his guests good night, Spock had gone to the garden and sitting on the stone bench in the meditation enclosure was now gazing at the

scintillating splendour of the Vulcan night. Actually he was attempting to rationally analyse the conflicting emotions which two Vulcan females had aroused in his breast. To be honest with himself, he had wistfully anticipated the moment when he would again meet T'Kahalin. T'Pring's abrupt appearance had caught him unawares and had triggered disquieting feelings of irritation and distrust.

/T'Pring ...what could be her purpose?/ he wondered. */For what reason had she flouted Vulcan convention? And what was Stonn about to let his consort, his chattel, attend, unescorted, a social gathering?/* That was a grave indiscretion but even more so had it been to address an unbonded male in a public place; and to be seen talking to the very man whom she had so publicly rejected a few years back was the height of folly.

And yet, whatever else she was, T'Pring was no fool, as he had learnt to his cost. At their aborted mating ceremony her reasoning had been 'flawlessly logical'. Therefore when she had, against all custom, spoken to him publicly she had acted deliberately, for a definite purpose. The question was... What purpose? Why...? Spock heaved a sigh. He was running round in circles and achieving nothing. It was best to put the matter on hold and await the developments which, if he knew T'Pring, would not fail to turn up.

/Hak'Tiwar Shun! ...Wait and see, as the Human saying went./ Having made his decision, Spock joined his hands in the ritual position, but before slipping into meditation he indulged for an instant in the mental contemplation of an absorbed face with shining golden-green eyes.

Meanwhile his friends had reached the same conclusion. "...and anyway," McCoy remarked, "nothing we can do,

except just wait and see. I'd better leave you to your beauty sleep. 'Night, Jim." He stood up stiffly and walked to the door.

"Good night, Bones, and thank you for the dinner," Kirk said, preparing for bed.

"Yeah... Nice little restaurant, and good company, wasn't it?" McCoy commented with a wink.

"Sure ...and a clever idea to invite them. I wouldn't mind having dinner with women of that class every night."

McCoy shot a knowing look at his Captain. "Uh oh, and which one exactly did you have in mind? T'Lian or T'Kahalin?"

"Well," Kirk produced his most disarming grin. "I admit that I find T'Kahalin terribly attractive. There's something about her..."

"Forget it, Jim," McCoy cut in. "If you're entertaining romantic thoughts about that girl, you'd better think again."

"How do you know?" Kirk sounded miffed. "All Vulcan she may be, but why shouldn't she be interested in a Starship Captain?"

"Probably because she's more interested in his First Officer. Good night." On that parting shot the Doctor left the room, closing the door gently behind him.

Jim Kirk sank onto his bed, a study in bemusement. "My First Officer? Spock? And T'Kahalin? Impossible!" Then realisation dawned as he recalled the scene he had witnessed in the Concert Hall. He broke into an impish grin. "Well...well...well... Mr Spock!"

Chapter 9

The air-car purred evenly over the expanse of sand and rock of The Forge. It skimmed over sandstone crags then dipped down to offer the passengers a closer view of the mineral deposits layered on the desert plain. Presently Spock touched the controls and swung the craft round to enter a deep canyon that slashed across the desert and zigzagged towards some hills in the distance.

"What is that hill up there, Spock?" asked Kirk, peering through the viewport, "and is that a building I see on top or a mirage?"

"It is the Tsai Shon Dag, the highest hill in the area. The Tsai Kal valley lies beyond. What you see on top is the observatory; we shall be there shortly."

The air-car gathered speed and began to ascend the dark granite mass of Tsai Shon Dag, which loomed as a forbidding barrier in front of them. With consummate skill the Vulcan slipped the craft between cliffs and crags while his passengers gazed in silent admiration at the stark beauty of the scenery. When the skimmer emerged into the open to hang over the edge of the hilltop, McCoy looked down at the view and commented, "This is the way I like to explore deserts and mountains; from a comfortable air-conditioned vehicle and definitely not the hard way, Jim. Trekking and climbing are very nice for the likes of you but I'm too old for all that."

"A pity, Doctor," Spock said as he set the air-car on the move again. "Everyone will tell you that the only way to really appreciate the desert is to trek and spend the nights out."

"Well, rather you than me."

"Oh come on, Bones," Kirk said. "One of these days we'll take you on a camping trip in the L'langon Mountains, and I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

"Nothing doing." McCoy was adamant. "I won't go unless you fly me over there in comfort." Kirk laughed and exchanged a glance with Spock.

"Okay then. We'll see what we can do, Bones."

The skimmer was now banking around the observatory and Spock pointed at a dark granite block crowned with a white, half-open cupola.

"You may be interested to know that there is the radio-telescope which allowed our astro-physicists to identify your solar system and Earth."

"Is it still operational?"

"No, Jim. It is now kept as a museum piece."

"When was that?" the Doctor asked.

"About the time when your own astronomers, Copernicus and Galileo, were beginning their study of your own system. However two more centuries elapsed here before manned vessels were launched into space and our exploration of the galaxy, including Earth, began."

"Must have been 'fascinating' to observe the Humans on the sly," Kirk remarked with a smile.

"It was," Spock answered. "The ships' logs of our earliest missions are stored in the Space Archives Department and I can tell you, Jim, their perusal is most instructive."

"I'll bet it is," Kirk grinned. "Your people must have had a shock at their

first sight of Humans. But why was no contact attempted for such a long time?"

"The prime directive, Captain. The principles of non-interference were applied by Vulcan long before the Federation came into being. For obvious reasons the Vulcan authorities considered that Humans were not prepared to encounter aliens from other worlds."

"And I don't blame them," Kirk agreed. "I remember reading the most appalling theories on the possible existence of other sentient beings in the universe."

"Indeed," Spock nodded, "but ignorance is the prime cause of fear and prejudice and your observers had little evidence to work with. If memory serves, the few Vulcan vessels which were detected were listed under the designation of U.F.O., Unidentified Flying Objects."

"That's right," McCoy put in. "There were some wild stories about U.F.O.'s; flying saucers, little green men, not to mention all that science-fiction stuff. But, come to think of it, Mr Spock, they weren't all that far from the mark with their little green men." The Doctor waited gleefully for Spock's reaction. Spock did not fail him.

"They were wide of the mark, Doctor," he firmly replied. "Vulcans may be endowed with green blood and elegant pointed ears but they have two eyes in the appropriate place, not just one in the middle of the face and they do not wear antennae as do the Andorians."

"And they are not blood-thirsty invaders but logical, peace-loving creatures," Kirk added with a fond glance at his comrade.

"Which is more than could be said

of Humans at that time, Jim. Actually some Vulcans wondered if they had been right in initiating contact with Earth. And nowadays," Spock added with a sidelong glance at McCoy, "there are still some people here who hold the opinion that Vulcan would be better off without the pernicious influence of Humans. The question is still debated."

The Doctor rose at once to the bait. "For Pete's sake, Spock. If Humans and Vulcans had never met you wouldn't be here to raise that silly question, now would you?"

An ironic eyebrow lifted slightly. "I have to admit that you may have a point there, Doctor," Spock acknowledged.

"Of course I have," McCoy shot back righteously.

"And," Kirk added, "if Vulcans had never contacted Humans, I wouldn't have a Vulcan as First Officer and friend."

"Indeed," Spock conceded, a warm look in his eyes. "So we may come to the conclusion that the discoveries made in this observatory were not entirely wasted. And now, if you agree, gentlemen, we shall proceed further."

"Proceed, proceed," the Doctor said. "I am curious to see that famous Tsai Kal you spoke about. How far is it?"

"It is very close, now." Spock set the hovering air-car in motion again, turning its nose in the opposite direction. As they reached the other edge of the plateau the Vulcan said complacently, "You asked for Tsai Kal, Doctor. Now, watch."

Suddenly, as if by magic, the rock-ledge disappeared from view and down below a vision of lush fields and woodland spread out as far as the eye could see. The contrast between the

fertile valley and the rocky world which they'd left behind was so striking that gasps of wonder escaped the lips of the Humans. The Vulcan, secretly pleased with their reaction, dipped the small craft in a smooth descent towards the heart of Tsai Kal and reducing speed let it glide over the tree-tops.

His friends then realised that what had looked like meadows and woods were actually acres of vegetable gardens and fruit groves, criss-crossed by a network of irrigation channels which sparkled in the sun.

"Gorgeous," Kirk commented in a low voice. "It's like finding the Promised Land after crossing the desert. Well done, Spock. Quite a surprise."

"And so unexpected," McCoy sounded awed. "I may be dumb but I never thought I would find such rich plantations on your planet, Spock."

"Where do you think that our fruit and vegetables come from? Very little food is imported, Doctor. This farm is only one out of many ... where there is water to be found, of course."

"That's the point," Kirk remarked. "I wonder where it comes from?"

"From the range of mountains you can see over yonder."

On their right, silhouetted against the ruby sky, rose a jagged line of mountains which sloped gently down to the valley and on the peaks of which hung some wisps of vapour.

"Is that a volcano?"

"Yes, Captain or more precisely a volcanic massif. They are dormant at the moment and their presence accounts for several geothermal springs and hence a

thermal establishment."

"So there are also spas on Vulcan." McCoy looked interested.

"Of course, Doctor. All natural resources are put to use and hydrotherapy is highly recommended by our Healers."

"As it is on Earth, Mr Spock," McCoy pointed out.

"Captain," Spock continued changing the skimmer's course. "May I suggest lunch at the plantation? The place is worth a visit and the inn is famous for its home-made cuisine."

"That sounds just right, Mr Spock. Let's go down and have a look around and then lunch with the local produce."

As the air-car approached a group of houses shaded by the trees and skimmed the roof-tops on the way to the landing-pad, some people in the front yard looked up and waved. Spock waggled the wings of the skimmer in answer and after making a U-turn, prepared to land.

"Looks like we're expected," the Captain said.

"We are, Jim. I warned the estate manager that we would come today."

"Is this their property?"

"No. They only run the place," Spock explained as the craft touched down smoothly.

"I say, what are those animals over there?" asked the Doctor. He was looking out of the side-port to where a dozen or so long-necked quadrupeds, in varying shades of brown, and obviously indifferent to their arrival, were grazing

the bluish turf of a paddock.

"They are chacks, Doctor. The Vulcan equivalent of horses," Spock replied as he cut the power.

"Horses?" McCoy scoffed. "More like a cross between a camel and a giraffe."

"They remind me of Andean llamas though they're much bigger," Kirk remarked. "What are they raised for?"

"Not for meat, I guess," the Doctor quipped.

"Certainly not," the Vulcan said with a shudder. "In the past the chacks were the only means of transportation and some people still keep them for riding. Otherwise the main herds are raised for the production of milk, wool and dung."

Kirk let out a chuckle, "Dung? Nothing's wasted here."

"Naturally, Captain," Spock replied, deadpan. "Shall we go? Do not forget your sun-visors. The glare is painful at this time of day."

As the hatch slid open the heat hit them like a blast from a furnace. With Spock in the lead the Enterprise officers quickly crossed the parking area and entered a hall where the Steward and his consort greeted them and offered the traditional drink of iced water.

In their neat pants and tunics these two looked more like a couple of electronic technicians rather than farmers. They both spoke fairly good Standard and willingly answered their visitors questions while they showed them through a succession of inner courts and shaded galleries into the garden.

The Captain and McCoy paused and looked round in amazement. On a planet noted for its aridity and scorching heat they found themselves practically immersed in water. There was water running in open tiled canals by the flower beds, gushing from fountains, spouting in rainbows, sprinkling from jets and splashing onto onyx-paved floors; tranquil water reflecting the blossoming trees overhead or sparkling like a mirror in the sun; water cascading down small chutes and gurgling away through clay conduits. The air was alive with the babbling of water and birds.

Kirk breathed in the scented air. "This is heavenly," he murmured. "The Promised Land, indeed."

"None of this water is wasted," Spock pointed out. "It is recycled and used over again. Water is the most precious thing on Vulcan."

"Perhaps the Captain would like to look around," the Manager, Skirel, suggested.

"If it isn't too much trouble," Kirk said with a smile.

"Not at all. My sons will be pleased to be of assistance," Skirel replied. He beckoned to two handsome youths who had been watching the new-comers with curiosity and who were so much alike that they had to be twins. As they exchanged the ritual paired-finger salute, the Captain was struck by their restrained charm, so much like that of his First Officer, and curiously by a certain likeness to Spock's features.

The youths were introduced as Shoran and Xan and were as Spock pointed out, "well versed in agronomy and capable of answering all questions about the plantation." Then he added, "If you will excuse me, Captain, I will leave

you and McCoy with the boys. I have some matters to talk over with Skirel."

Kirk willingly accepted the arrangement, inwardly wondering what those 'matters' could be. As the two Vulcans took themselves off he turned to the twins. "Well, young men, it's up to you now," he said pleasantly.

"It is not possible to visit the whole estate within the time limit," one of them said, "so, perhaps there is something particular which you wish to see?"

"Whatever you say. What's the most interesting?" McCoy said. "Just as long as we don't have to stand too long in the sun... Oh, and I would very much like to see those chacks of yours, if it's possible."

"Certainly, Doctor McCoy. The mews where we keep the stallions and the mares with young are just down that way."

In the functional and spotlessly clean stables the visitors found the mares bleating softly and fussing over their young, who could hardly stand on their shaky legs. They were touching little creatures with soft fluffy pelts and liquid eyes which at once stole the tender heart of the Doctor. The Captain had some difficulty in dragging him away from the nursery to go and see the stallions who could be heard kicking next door. Among the fine-looking beasts, that pricked up their ears at the visitors and begged for tit-bits, Kirk noticed a handsome animal with a glossy black coat, golden mane and fiery brown eyes.

"Bones," he called. "Come and look at this one. He's a beauty."

"Indeed, sir. He is our best. His name is Champion," one of the twins informed him.

"Champion? A Terran name? Why?" McCoy asked curiously.

"Commander Spock gave him his name and it is well deserved."

"... and Champion is so spirited," his brother added, "that only Spock can ride him. He accepts no-one else, not even my father."

Kirk's and McCoy's eyes met in surprise. This revealed quite a new facet to their sober Vulcan's personality.

"Does Spock come here often?" Kirk asked the youths.

"Whenever he stays in ShiKahr, sir. Unfortunately that is but rarely," he was told.

Then the Humans were shown the solar power plant, the computerised hydraulic centre, the cold stores and automated packing units which were next to a transporter room from where the farm produce was beamed directly to the markets, food stores and restaurants. They were amused to hear that Taillevent got its daily supply of fruit and vegetables from the Tsai Kal farm.

The organisation was simple and ingenious and showed Vulcan efficiency at its best. In this self-sufficient domain, as isolated in the mountains as a starship in outer space, function and beauty were combined to an extreme degree and all with the least possible disturbance to the environment. They also had to hand it to the boys; they certainly had done their homework, were pleasantly articulate and made the visit quite enjoyable.

McCoy, whose interest in high tech was not inexhaustible, accepted with alacrity the suggestion of a short tour of

the gardens. As they strolled along an alley of fruit trees he told Kirk in an undertone, "Jim, I'm not sure if it is a mirage or a belated hangover... but I believe that I'm having hallucinations."

"Bones? Whatever do you mean?"

"The twins, Jim. They sure make me see double. They look like two peas in a pod; dressed alike, moving alike, speaking alike... I'll bet that they even think alike. I find it positively weird."

Kirk nodded and grinned. "What else can you expect with Vulcan telepathic twins? Hard to tell which is which, isn't it?"

"You're telling me." McCoy rolled his eyes skyward.

Seeing that the twins had paused and were looking expectantly at them, Kirk thought he should explain. "Sorry, young men, but Doctor McCoy is a bit confused about you. It's difficult for us to tell you apart, you see."

Both nodded gravely in assent. "Perfectly, Captain. It is a common reaction among our visitors," one of the youths replied. Pointing to his brother he added, "He is Shoran and I am Xan."

"Are you sure?" McCoy teased, peering at them.

"Positive, Doctor," they chorused solemnly.

"Well, if you say so," the Doctor grinned amiably.

Without more ado, they proceeded through the gardens and at the sight of all the fruit and greenery the Humans found their mouths watering. Sensing their thirst, Xan drew a knife from his belt, selected a bronze melon-like fruit, split it

open and revealed an amber heart brimming with juice. He deftly carved out thick slices and offered them to his guests.

McCoy, out of habit, whipped out his mini-tricorder saying, "Just a minute, son. I'd better check if it's all right for us."

"It is, sir. It is quite compatible with Human physiology," Xan assured him.

"All our produce is consumed quite safely by the Lady Amanda and the other Humans residing in ShiKahr," Shoran stated.

Blue eyes met hazel ones crinkling with mirth. "There you are, Bones. What better guarantee do you need? I'll have some of that fruit, please and so will the Doctor... never mind his tricorder."

The Vulcan melon was indeed delicious, sweet with a slightly bitter tang, and while they were about it more fruit was picked, sliced and consumed with obvious relish. As Kirk washed his sticky hands in a fountain he asked the twins about Amanda and how they knew her.

"Our family belongs to the Xtmprsqzntwlfld Clan," he was told. "Our father is kin to Sarek."

"Oh, I see. So you and Spock are related?" Kirk asked.

"We are cousins," was the smug reply. "Perhaps you would care to see the greenhouses? We have a number of exotic plants acclimatised to Vulcan conditions, from which we have obtained hybrids adapted to our climate."

"Sure, lead the way," the Captain said genially, ready for anything.

They walked through an air-lock

and entered a large conservatory roofed with smoked polarised glass. The dim light and cool air humidified by sprinklers were a relief for the Humans. Taking off their sun-visors they followed their escorts along the lanes noting with amusement such familiar vegetables as beans, peas, cucumbers and tomatoes running along wires or climbing over trellises. What tickled McCoy most was to find plots of carrots, potatoes and cabbages.

"Just look at that," he declared. "A cabbage patch on Vulcan. It has to be seen to be believed. I'll bet this is where Amanda comes when she's homesick."

Even more impressive was the fruit section where, carefully pruned and labelled, a large variety of fruit trees from other worlds prospered. The Captain, gazing in wonder at clusters of cherries and peaches, remarked, "There seems to a majority of Terran varieties. Is there any particular reason? Is it of your choosing or that of your landlord?"

"Landlord, Captain?"

"He means the person who owns the farm," McCoy explained. "Does he let you run the place at your own discretion or does he make the decisions? From what we've seen he apparently doesn't object to the use of good soil for your biogenetic experiments."

"Object, Doctor?" the young Vulcans blinked in confusion. "On the contrary, it was on his specific instructions that the greenhouse and laboratory were built and the farm reorganised on scientific principles," Xan explained.

"And," Shoran added, "following on his recommendations the work on the farm has improved so much that we have doubled our production in three years."

Kirk whistled in appreciation. "Remarkable, but as your landowner is so mindful of his property why doesn't he live here?"

The twins exchanged a glance. "He cannot, Captain," Xan rejoined, "because of his obligations to Starfleet."

Both Humans looked bemused. "Starfleet?" McCoy repeated. "Wait a minute, son. Do you mean to say he's in the Service?"

"Of course, Doctor... as you must be aware." The twins also looked bemused.

Suddenly the truth dawned on the Captain, who burst out laughing. "Bones, we're a couple of prize idiots. Don't you understand? Their blessed landlord is none other than Spock himself. Am I right?"

"Naturally," the twins chorused wondering if the Humans were in their right minds.

"I should have guessed sooner," Kirk chuckled.

McCoy's eyes widened in disbelief. "Spock owns this place, you mean?"

"He owns the whole of the Tsai Kal valley up to the hot springs," he was told.

"Good God! He owns the whole caboodle and never so much as breathed a word about it. I wonder what made him so cagey?"

"You know how reticent he is on private matters, Doctor. Perhaps he preferred to let us find out by ourselves," Kirk said quietly. Then seeing disapproval on the Vulcans' faces, he added with a disarming smile, "Don't take what McCoy said about Spock in earnest... he doesn't mean it. It's just his

way of talking. And we didn't know about it, which is why we've been talking at cross-purposes. Do you understand?"

The young faces cleared perceptibly. "We understand, Captain. But we should say that to mention one's properties or interests is regarded with disfavour on Vulcan."

"Even to close friends?" McCoy asked in surprise.

"Yes, Doctor. It is viewed as ostentatious and in bad taste," was the reply.

"Is that so? Thank you for telling us, Xan. Seems we still have much to learn about your people," McCoy said with an eyebrow cocked at Kirk.

The twins bowed wordlessly and Shoran touched a plate to open a frosted-glass door. The next moment the two Humans found themselves in the Botany lab of the Enterprise or - except for its size - its exact counterpart. The three Vulcans standing in one corner of the room moved apart at their arrival revealing Spock sitting deeply absorbed over a microscope. A few seconds went by in silence before he looked up and said, "Yes, I agree. This is definitely the most viable hybrid to be obtained so far. You should continue the tests. A dozen samples on the H.34 plot should be sufficient for now."

"Agreed, Commander," the woman in white overalls replied.

Spock stood up and caught sight of his friends. "Captain, Doctor. I trust that your visit was profitable and your guides competent?"

"They certainly were. We had a most instructive tour and I am very much impressed with your domain, Spock," the

Doctor said pointedly.

"Are you, Doctor? That is most gratifying," Spock replied serenely.

"Spock, I'm curious," Kirk intervened. "What kind of plant are you working on just now?" He pointed to the microscope.

"Strawberries, Jim. We wish to obtain a hardy variety capable of surviving and reproducing in our climate."

McCoy was amused. "Strawberries? How about that? Any particular reason, Spock?"

It was Skirel who replied. "A very good reason, Doctor. Strawberries are the Lady Amanda's favoured fruit. Therefore we are trying to acclimatise the species."

"And I'll bet you want to give her a surprise," concluded the Captain with a fond smile at his Vulcan friend.

"Yes, Captain. So I would appreciate you not mentioning it to my mother. Now, I believe the meal is ready for us." He looked inquiringly at Skirel's consort, who moved to the door. "If you wish to freshen up," he added, "T'Mur will show you the way."

Luncheon turned out to be another new experience for the Starfleet officers. It was served on the inn's patio and in the Vulcan mode; platters of vegetarian dishes, salads, fruits and drinks were served on a low table around which the family and guests reclined or sat cross-legged on piles of hand-woven rugs whose colourful patterns reminded Kirk of Kilim carpets.

After the traditional cup of Karveesh, McCoy and Kirk realised that they were ravenous. So without further

ado they followed the Vulcans' lead and heartily tucked in, with the assistance of the twins, who had appointed themselves attendants, and with occasional suggestions from Spock, who observed the youngsters' little game with tolerant amusement. Apparently his Human guests and his young cousins had become the best of friends and the simple fare of the farm was well appreciated. In fact the Tsai Kal inn was a popular place in the area and was always well patronised.

Doctor McCoy pleasantly replete and relaxed was gazing idly at the customers coming and going through the inn when something made him sit up and nudge Jim Kirk, who was reclining beside him.

"Huh? What's up, Bones?" the Captain asked.

McCoy wordlessly nodded at a group of women walking along the gallery, one of whom was looking across in their direction.

Kirk swore under his breath, "Here she is again."

"Yeah, T'Pring again. Damn nuisance... like a recurrent nightmare," the Doctor commented dryly.

Spock, who was talking quietly with Skirel and T'Mur, saw nothing of the by-play. Looking up he said to his friends, "Captain, Doctor, you expressed the wish to ride a chack and to visit the spa. Skirel proposes that the twins fly the air-car while we ride to the spa. Then they can bring the chacks back while we fly directly home. What do you think?"

Kirk flashed one of his smiles. "Splendid idea, Skirel. Let's do that... if your sons have no objections, of course." The twins had no objections; the Doctor, on the contrary had lots of objections.

"Are you mad, Jim?" he expostulated. "All we'll get is a broken neck and sunstroke into the bargain. Okay, suit yourself, but count me out. I'll take the ride with the boys and meet you at the springs."

Spock raised an eyebrow in mock astonishment. "You surprise me, Doctor. I was told that you were much taken with the chacks and I assumed that you would enjoy a pleasant ride across the hills."

"In this sizzling heat? You must be joking, Spock. No, you two carry on with your joy-ride. I'll go as I said ... in the air-car with the twins."

So that was that. Half an hour later, while the good Doctor was indulging in a cat-nap, Captain Kirk, under Spock's watchful guidance was given his first chack riding lesson - and that, as Kirk soon found out, was a novel experience in itself.

First, several animals were brought into the paddock and lined up in front of Kirk, who was then invited to touch each one in turn.

"Why?" he asked in surprise. "Do you want me to choose? I have no idea, Spock. You'd better do it for me."

"No, Jim. It is not for us to choose, it is for them. Before you can ride a chack, you must be accepted."

Kirk's eyes widened. "Don't tell me they're telepathic?" he exclaimed.

"Indeed, to a certain extent, they are," the Vulcan replied, amused by his Captain's reaction. "You must touch them so that they know and accept you... or not."

Experienced horseman though he was, Jim Kirk had never mounted a telepathic animal and he found the idea

rather... disquieting. Mental contact with sentient beings was acceptable, even rewarding as those with Spock had been, but with animals... Well, he could but try.

Tentatively, he patted the neck of a dark brown chack, then another and another. Nothing; no reaction. The chacks stood very quietly, even expectantly, and he felt the Vulcans watching him as he walked along the line. *Damn, he thought, it won't work. They don't want me. Perhaps they don't like Humans.*

He looked questioningly at Spock, who gave him an encouraging nod. Self-consciously, Kirk proceeded with the test and came upon a handsome cinnamom coloured beast with a white mark on its forehead. As he touched the soft pelt he felt a strange sensation, a shy curious mental touch, and the chack pushed its velvety nose into his hand.

"That's it, Spock!" exclaimed a delighted Kirk. "I think this one wants me." He stroked the long furry neck and smiled at the gentle brown eyes.

"Yes, Captain. Obviously you have been accepted," Spock said, patting the glossy rump of the animal. "The test was essential, since our chacks are not accustomed to outworlders. You should have no difficulty riding Lak'Tur now."

"Lak'Tur? Is that its name? Does it mean anything?"

"Yes, Captain," Xan said. "It means Morning Star because of the mark on her forehead."

"And it is 'her' name, Jim. This is a female," Spock pointed out, adding under his breath, "which might explain why she accepted you so readily."

Kirk shot him a suspicious look. "And what's that suppose to mean, Mr

Spock?"

"Nothing in particular, Captain. Merely an observation followed by a logical deduction."

The air of bland innocence did not fool Kirk in the least but he merely replied, "Really? You surprise me." Neither man missed the teasing twinkle in the other's eyes.

Meanwhile Lak'Tur was being equipped with some light trappings that encircled her head and neck, crossed over in front, went under her belly and ended as a strap across the shoulders. Kirk had never seen anything like it; the harness was made of braided fibre and brightly coloured wool and enhanced with tassels and pompoms. It gave the cinnamom chack the appearance of some heraldic beast.

"Jim," Spock said in an aside, "we do not use saddles on Vulcan. Can you ride bare-back?"

"Sure," Kirk replied confidently. "That's the way I used to ride as a kid, back in Iowa. But what about a bridle and bit?"

"Bits are proscribed here. They only serve to hurt the animals' mouths, and they are pointless, since rider and mount are mentally linked. This why your body and hers must be in contact. Lak'Tur will know what you want her to do but make sure to give her simple, logical commands. Try to restrain any emotional impulse which will only confuse her."

Kirk could not help laughing. "She's Vulcan all right. Okay... let's give it a try." Putting his foot into Spock's locked hands he mounted the mare, grabbed her shoulder strap and gently kneed her forward.

After some false manoeuvres it did not take the Captain long to grasp the technique of chack-riding and also to adjust to Lak'Tur's rolling gait. It was trickier to clear his mind of irrelevant thoughts and focus on precise orders but 'Morning Star' was a gentle creature, and before long the two of them were trotting gaily around the paddock under the critical eye of the Vulcans. When at last Kirk brought Lak'Tur to a halt in front of Spock, a murmur of appreciation rose from his audience and brought a flush of pleasure to his cheeks.

However what gave him most satisfaction was the warm look of approval in Spock's dark eyes as he asked him, "Satisfied, Captain?"

"Delighted, Spock," Kirk grinned giving a fond pat to the mare. "She's a dear, and strangely enough I had no difficulty in communicating."

"It is the only way, Jim. One cannot ride a chack unless one is mentally attuned to it."

"So that's what they meant, back there in the stables, when they told us that only you can ride Champion. Rather choosy, isn't he? Why is that?" Kirk grinned.

A slanted eyebrow angled upward. "I could not say, Captain. A special affinity, probably," Spock blandly replied.

Moments later, having taken leave of Skirel and family and entrusted McCoy to the twins, Kirk and Spock went to the front yard where the grooms had led their chacks. As soon as he saw Spock, Champion, a vision of raven pelt and multi-coloured trappings began to stomp and fret. The stable boy let him go and he pranced up to Spock and nuzzled his chest and shoulders. The Vulcan laid a hand on the chack's brow and at once

Champion stood perfectly still.

"What's he doing, Jim?" McCoy muttered. "A mindlink or something?"

"Exactly, Bones. A rider and his chack are mentally attuned. These animals are telepaths."

"Are they now. And what about you? Are you attuned also?"

"Sure," Kirk said proudly. "Come and meet my lovely mare. Her name is 'Morning Star'. Pretty, isn't she?"

"A girl, eh? I might have known," was McCoy's caustic comment as he ran his fingers through the soft wool of the mare's neck. "She sure looks dandy with those fancy trimmings. Never thought that our sober Vulcans would favour such finery, though... and that chack of Spock's, isn't he some sight?"

Spock had vaulted onto Champion and was restraining him with a firm grip. He watched Kirk mount his mare than called, "Ready, Captain?"

"Ready, Spock. Lead on."

The chacks sprang forward and set off at top speed down the sandy road. The last thing McCoy heard was a "See you at the Springs," from Kirk, who waved cheerfully before vanishing from view in the red glow of Eridani. No-one among the onlookers noticed the two women who had missed nothing of the scene and now quietly slipped back to their air-car.

Chapter 10

So far, Kirk decided, the ride had been a real treat. After passing endless groves and grainfields they had left the

road and climbed through pastures peopled with herds of chacks, up to the heights where the thin air was perceptibly cooler and the breathtaking view covered the whole valley.

Although he felt sore from his lack of practice - and saddle - the Captain enjoyed trotting alongside Spock, who proved to be an accomplished horseman, or should one say 'chackman'? Not that Kirk found that surprising; it had been a while since he had learned that whatever his First Officer undertook was achieved with nothing short of Vulcan excellence.

Come to think of it he was not displeased with his own performance, and, for a first try at chack-riding he was doing quite well. To be fair, he had to hand a lot to Lak'Tur; he had seldom mounted a more sure-footed mare. She was a joy to ride and Kirk felt perfectly secure as she daintily picked her way along the narrow tracks of the ridge. One false move, and he would surely crash down into the ravine. He kept his eyes glued to Spock's back rocking with rhythmic ease to the motion of his mount, and let his mare take care of the rest.

As they topped yet another summit a sulphurous smell wafted up to Kirk's nostrils, and after rounding an obsidian outcrop an amazing view suddenly met his eyes. The chacks paused of their own accord and gave them time to gaze at the vast mesa which spread out at their feet as far as the foothills of the Tsai Dag. Above its bleached surface, pockmarked with bubbling springs, ghostlike wisps of vapour floated and twisted in the breeze. Adding to the eeriness of the scene geysers roared spasmodically, spitting out jets of steam which fanned out to condense in myriads of droplets which formed sparkling rainbows against the backdrop of stark basaltic cliffs before splashing back down to their source.

After a moment of spellbound contemplation, Jim Kirk broke the silence. "Beautiful, Spock, truly beautiful. Thank you for letting me share this."

A glimmer shone in the Vulcan's eyes. "My pleasure, Jim," he said soberly. Pointing downwards he added, "The building you can see at the foot of the cliffs is our destination, the Tsai Kal watering place.

"Also your property, I presume?" Kirk teased.

"Yes, Captain. Or, more precisely, a joint ownership with Sarek. I inherited this land from my grandfather, but since I am seldom here my father sees to the management, except for the farm, which is my personal concern."

"So I gathered, Spock, and it's something you can be proud of."

"I see nothing to be proud of, Jim. I only take advantage of what nature has given me."

Kirk observed the raised eyebrow with a smile. "That's one way of putting it, Mr Spock," he remarked. The chacks stirred and stomped, then feeling that the pause was over they started down hill at a brisk pace.

As they were cautiously skirting a number of bubbling mudsprings and deceitfully still pools that reflected the red sky the drone of an engine caught their attention. An air-car came swooping from behind the hill to hover above their heads. Kirk recognized Spock's family crest on its flank and pointed. "Look. Here they are. What good timing - and look at McCoy. He's having a good time, isn't he?"

He waved back at the Doctor, whose smiling face and waving hand

appeared through the view-port. After a few seconds the craft banked away and after a few circles over the geyser field it headed towards the Spa and disappeared from view.

When, some twenty minutes later, the two riders reached the establishment and dismounted at the foot of the steps they entrusted their chacks to an attendant who led the animals off for a well-deserved treat of fodder and water. Kirk, after a parting pat for Lak'Tur, followed Spock up the marble steps and remarked, "That mental contact was a memorable experience, Spock. She's a lovely lady. I shall miss her."

"You don't have to, Jim. Lak'Tur is yours for the duration of our leave. Come to the farm any time you like."

"Thank you, Spock. I think I'll take you at your word. This valley of yours is the ideal place for relaxation and I'm sure McCoy will agree."

The stairs led to a large terrace which extended along the whole facade of the Spa and overlooked the site of the Tsai Kal Springs. At one end, protected by a colourful canvas awning, stood a well patronised open-air cafe where Spock and his Captain found McCoy and the twins relaxing as they enjoyed the view and several cold drinks.

"Well, well, look who's here, our brave travellers," said the Doctor. "Jim, you must be exhausted. How do you feel?"

"Pretty good, thank you, Doctor - though a bit stiff and sore in the nether regions," Kirk replied as he sat down cautiously.

"A spell in the hot pools will soon dispel your discomfort, Captain," Spock assured him.

"Oh good. Not that I'm complaining, Bones. That trip was worth a few bruises. I wouldn't have missed it for anything.... Oh great, just what I need." And he gulped, with relish, the fruit juice just brought him by a waiter.

"Well, Spock, all I can say is that the whole valley is worth the trip," McCoy declared. "Thanks to our friends here I believe I've seen everything there is to be seen. Shoran and Xan have been the perfect hosts."

"It has been our pleasure, Doctor," Xan replied. "But there is still more to see whenever you come back."

"Why, thank you, my boy. I'd like to... that is, if your landlord has no objection?"

McCoy cocked an eye at Spock who calmly replied, "No objection at all, Doctor."

"Yes, Bones, we're invited here any time we like," Kirk put in, "and I'm sure that I'll take advantage of the offer."

By this time Eridani was slowly slipping behind the Tsai Dag peaks and the shadows were lengthening over the field of springs. It was time for the twins to leave and take the chacks home. The adieus were brief but heartfelt, and before going in the three men watched the young Vulcans leave with one riding Lak'Tur and the other running alongside Champion. This last was a sight which provoked the Doctor's righteous indignation.

"I can't believe it. That poor boy will have to run all the way home because that dumb chack of yours won't accept anyone but you on its back? It's outrageous... it's... it's inhuman."

"Quite right, Doctor. It is Vulcan,"

Spock said, deadpan. Seeing McCoy's face turn dangerously crimson he continued dryly, "Kindly remember that they are Vulcan. Have you not yet learned the differences between Human and Vulcan physiology? Do not concern yourself with the twins, Doctor. They are accustomed to exertion and they will take turns riding Lak'Tur."

"Of all the callous, pointed-eared devils," McCoy grumbled darkly as they walked across the hall to the Manager's office.

"Lay off, Bones," Kirk told him quietly. "You know he's right."

The Doctor shot him an exasperated look. "Yeah, I know! And that's what makes me so mad."

The Humans were duly introduced to the Senior Healer and his staff and were graciously invited to tour the geothermal facilities. The Doctor's interest focused, naturally, on the medical equipment and hydro-units which proved the Vulcans' expertise in natural cures. The Captain's attention, on the other hand, went on the aesthetics of the complex, its subdued lighting and tasteful combination of basalt and marble. If it were not for the odour of sulphur which clung to him like a Rigellian bat then Kirk thought he might well recommend the Tsai Kal Spa and its first-class hotel for R & R.

His appreciation grew perceptibly when the medical attendant showed them into the caves, both natural and excavated, where people could relax or exercise in the thermal pools. The sight of all those Vulcans bathing in the dark mirrored pools which reflected the soft lights studding the obsidian vault walls made him conscious of his aching muscles.

"Spock," he asked in an undertone, "do you think that we could...?"

"Certainly. I was just about to suggest a dip in the pools. I am sure you will find them pleasant and relaxing."

"That's just what I need at the moment," Kirk said happily. "What about you, Bones?"

"Just what the Doctor ordered," McCoy grinned his approval. "I suppose these waters are suitable for Humans?" he asked their escort.

"Yes, Doctor," the Vulcan replied. "Our best reference is the Lady Amanda, who comes here regularly."

"I expected no less," said McCoy with a wink at the Captain. "Okay then, let's go and take a bath. One thing though - we don't have bathing suits."

"That is no problem, Doctor," Spock remarked casually. "You won't need any. No-one wears swimsuits on Vulcan."

Taken aback McCoy looked around, and his eyes widened as he realised that none of the Vulcans by the pools wore anything but their graceful, unflappable Vulcan dignity.

"Any objections, Bones?" teased the Captain. "After all when in Rome..."

"Oh, none at all. On the contrary, Jim, I find it most... er... instructive," McCoy replied good-humouredly. He eyed appreciatively several attractive ladies as they strolled nonchalantly by. "However I hope that we can at least have a towel."

"Towels are usually provided in the changing rooms," Spock said, and looked inquiringly at the attendant who was staring bemusedly at McCoy.

"Sir? Towels? Yes, sir. In the locker rooms," he replied stiffly and led them back to the side rooms.

"Doctor," Spock said with a significant glance, "let me remind you that physical appearance is unimportant on Vulcan. No-one cares, no-one pays any attention and you would be well-advised to do likewise."

"In other words," Kirk added with a wink, "stop leering at the pretty girls, Bones."

"Look who's talking," the Doctor scoffed. "James T. Kirk, the skirt-chaser of the galaxy."

"At least I didn't shock that young medic green," Kirk retorted as he began to undress.

"Okay, okay. From now on I'll keep my eyes to myself," the Doctor grumbled. He threw open his locker. "Now, where's that towel?"

A few minutes later the three men were luxuriously soaking in a bubbling pool in companionable silence. The moist heat and soothing sound of the water made for drowsiness and Jim Kirk felt his eyelids droop with fatigue. Footsteps padding softly on the pavement hardly disturbed him, but when some gliding feet approached and stopped by their pool curiosity urged him to open a lazy eye.

He jerked upright, wide awake, for within arms reach stood a pair of long and shapely legs. Unconsciously, Kirk let his gaze travel appreciatively upwards, noting on the way the perfect figure barely concealed by a large towel, then... Good God... that face! T'Pring. Kirk froze, then noticed that neither he nor McCoy sousing quietly beside him were in her line of sight.

The target for her cold, searching eyes was Spock. The Vulcan was leaning against the smooth marble ledge, shoulders glistening in the steaming water, and was gazing steadily back at the woman. The silence was so tense, so palpable, that the good Doctor was drawn out of his nap.

"Sorry," he yawned blissfully, "I think I fell asleep... What?... Oh damn!" He fell silent and warily eyed the scene, noting that no matter what Spock always managed to retain his dignity - even naked in a bubble pool.

T'Pring spoke a few words in Vulcanur. Spock answered in the same language and she withdrew. There was an awkward pause; suddenly Spock sank into the pool, a few seconds went by, then he came up again, flipping water from his head and said with assumed indifference, "My apologies, gentlemen, for this unexpected encounter. If you are rested we may proceed to the main pool."

"Just a minute, Spock," McCoy cut in gruffly. "I'm not so sure about unexpected. Seems to me that your ex has a tendency to turn up much too often for it to be coincidence."

Spock looked at him. "You may be right. Indeed, there has been a curious convergence of random factors."

McCoy snorted, "Mark my words, Spock. It's deliberate; she's been chasing you all over since we arrived. Hasn't she, Jim?"

"Bones is right, Spock. I don't know how she obtains her information but she certainly is persistent. She's always there, wherever we go. Does she still want to speak to you privately?"

"Yes. I agreed to meet her after we have finished here."

"Well," Kirk grimaced, "maybe you're right. Better see what she wants and get it over with. Okay, the last one in that pool will buy the drinks. Come on."

From the Tsai Kal's terrace Spock and T'Pring looked silently at the hot-springs where they danced in the ruby haze of the Vulcan dusk. To Kirk and McCoy, who were sitting in the cafe some distance away, they might as well have been a couple of statues as motionless as the potted trees lining the balustrade.

Forgetful of the glorious view the two men glanced unobtrusively in the direction of the pair. As they had left the changing rooms they had met T'Pring in the hall.

She had barely spared them a glance, just said to Spock, "It was agreed that I would see you alone."

Spock had inclined his head in stiff formality and quietly said, "Captain, Doctor, please excuse me." On Kirk's nod of assent he had ushered the woman out of the hall.

McCoy grunted, took a swig of K'Vass and asked, "Do you think they are carrying their tete-a-tete on by telepathy?"

Kirk shrugged, "Can't say, Bones. It's possible... No, look, they are talking."

Spock was now leaning against the balustrade and dispassionately studying his former betrothed. "You wish to speak with me, T'Pring? Why did you not come to the house of my parents?"

She gave him a scornful glance. "A chattel does not enter the house of an unbonded male, as you ought to know." There was a bitterness in her voice.

"Granted, but then it is hardly proper for a... chattel to talk to an unbonded male in a public place."

"There are times and circumstances when such improper conduct is inevitable," she coolly declared.

Spock's eyebrows crept up at this unexpected statement. "Indeed? And what has Stonn to say about that?" he enquired politely.

"Stonn is away in the south, at the moment," she replied curtly, dismissing her consort as a non-important matter.

"I see," he replied imperturbably, while through his mind ran a quote remembered from long ago; 'Curiouser and curiouser.'

He waited for her to make the next move but she merely stood in front of him, studying him appraisingly as if she had never seen him before or was discovering in him traits that she had previously ignored.

With a touch of impatience, Spock broke the silence. "You requested a meeting. I am here. Will you kindly come to the point."

She looked away, her hands pressed together, seemingly collecting her thoughts. Then she met his gaze and said, "Spock, it has come to my attention that you have not yet taken a consort."

"You are well informed," he remarked coldly.

"Who could not be when you and your Captain are constantly in the news." T'Pring sounded sarcastic. "That is the price to pay for being a legend."

Spock frowned. "I doubt it," he retorted. "My private life is not a fitting

subject for the Intergalactic News. As for being a legend," he raised a wry eyebrow, "was not that the reason you gave for rejecting me?"

"True." She paused, then, "I should have known better," she admitted.

Spock eyed the girl with curiosity. "Exactly what do you mean by that?" he asked.

T'Pring turned away and leaning on the parapet gazed out into the gathering twilight. "It has been some time," she said presently, "since Stonn and I realised that the Kal-if-Fee was an error. Our bonding is a failure; we are mentally and physically incompatible. Stonn no longer wants me, nor do I want him."

"But," Spock sounded shocked, "the bonding is a total abiding commitment. How can you?"

She raised a disdainful eyebrow. "That is what we are told. In reality it is not so. Our decision is made. After obtaining the Family's agreement we shall initiate the unbonding and then go our separate ways."

A pause ensued, then Spock said in a neutral tone of voice, "I see. You have both found out then that having is not so pleasing a thing as wanting."

"I will admit that. However what is lost on the one hand may be regained on the other," T'Pring said pointedly. At Spock's blank expression she continued tranquilly, "Don't you see? You are still unbonded and I shall be so, soon. Our logical course of action is to start afresh on the course that was interrupted some years back. Do you not agree?"

Spock stood frozen in disbelief. The woman was incredible. She had deliberately broken their betrothal,

publicly rejected him and chosen his Captain for champion. More, she had known they were friends, she had sensed his thoughts, his agony and had listened with contemptuous indifference as he pleaded for Jim's life ... and now, she had come to him with the proposal that they bond once more. He repressed a shudder and tightly replied, "I regret, T'Pring, that it is out of the question."

She searched his face with narrowed eyes. "Why?" she asked. "You have no consort... therefore why not?" Her eyes turned cold as a thought crossed her mind. "Or can the rumours be true, about you and Kirk?"

Anger and embarrassment washed over Spock and he coldly replied, "I am surprised at you, T'Pring. A Vulcan should pay no heed to gossip. My reasons are simple. I am a Starfleet Officer, my career lies in outer space. I cannot commit myself to a wife and family."

T'Pring repressed some annoyance and tried another tack. "The time will come when your need for a mate will take precedence over all other considerations. What will you do then? Where will you find a suitable female? Have you considered your situation, Spock?"

Her bold indiscretion took his breath away. Pon farr was a deeply personal matter. How dared she? "That will be dealt with at the proper time. The problem is no concern of yours," he said in a tone that ended the matter. "I regret, T'Pring, that I must decline your offer. I must admit to some surprise, however. Why do you make this proposal to me? Surely there are many unbonded Vulcans who would be honoured to wed with you? I do not understand."

T'Pring, deeply mortified, considered her options. Her prime

motivation was, always had been, self-interest. Now the execution of her plans had proved to be more complex than she had anticipated. Spock was more unapproachable than she had thought, which made him even more desirable. Indeed, now that they were standing face to face, now that she felt the full force of his magnetism, T'Pring wondered how she could ever have wanted that dull, stolid Stonn, how she could have given up all that Spock represented: estates, wealth, high position in Vulcan society, notoriety in the Federation ... and above all else, the man whom she now determined to have.

In truth, T'Pring had never realised, until now, how dangerously attractive Spock was. She could not let him go; she still had one argument which logically would make him reconsider his refusal. Now was the time to bring to a conclusion the scheme she had so carefully conceived. So, locking her eyes with his, she softly replied, "Don't you, Spock? Don't you remember that you won the combat over my challenger and therefore won rightful possession of me? You gave me to Stonn since he wanted me but now he wants me no longer. So by right and tradition, I am yours. You must take me, Spock."

Spock drew himself up and a flash of irritation shone in his eyes. "Your reasoning is inconsistent. What has been given cannot be taken back. It is wrong to do so; it is not my way. You say that Stonn does not want you but neither do I; therefore you are no longer anyone's property. I willingly give you back your freedom."

"You cannot. You have to take me," she insisted. As he stared at her wordlessly, she explained with a certain delectation, "We are still bonded."

He paled perceptibly. "No!" The

word was torn from him before he could contain himself. "No ... Impossible."

T'Pring shot him a look of triumph. "Has it not occurred to you that the link which has joined us since childhood was never severed? Have you never felt it stir in your mind? I have, Spock, more than once. Our link has remained dormant and now I feel it re-awakening, needing you."

Spock refused to contemplate the idea of bonding with T'Pring and firmly crushed the emotions that he felt dangerously near the surface as he repeated, "That is impossible. It must be some unconscious delusion due to..."

"Are you implying that I am insane, Spock?" she cut in, eyes blazing with anger. "It is you who are deluding yourself. The bond is still there. Let me prove it to you." She moved closer, hands raised, "Let us join minds."

Shaking his head, Spock stepped back. "No, T'Pring. You presume too much. I know for certain that we have nothing in common. The link was broken, definitely broken, when you made me kill my Captain. When I saw him dead at my feet, I felt at once released of the piak-tow and from our bond. I know my mind, T'Pring. You are no longer there."

Stung by his rebuff, she lashed out. "Who is it, then? That Human, Kirk? Or, perhaps that woman, T'Kahalin? I saw you together, I SAW you look at her."

At the spite unleashed in her voice, in her eyes, Spock felt sick. "Please control yourself," he said sharply, his voice edged with steel. "This is unworthy of a Vulcan. What has been done cannot be undone; the time is long past for you to rewrite what you blotted out. It is too late, T'Pring."

Spock's stern expression told the girl that she had failed; her schemes, her prospects were dashed to the ground all at once. Blinded by hurt pride, she failed to see the compassion in Spock's eyes and said curtly, "So be it, Spock, but mind that you do not regret your decision." Turning on her heel, she stalked away without a backward glance.

From the cafe, McCoy and the Captain watched T'Pring march blindly past them and exchanged a glance.

"Did you see that, Jim?" the Doctor muttered.

"Mmmm ...something went wrong. I wonder..." Kirk mused, and looked uncertainly at Spock's silhouette who was know apparently staring out into the dark.

"You bet," McCoy retorted. "I don't want to jump to conclusions but T'Pring looked like a girl who'd just been jilted."

Kirk looked startled, then with another glance at Spock, got to his feet and said, "Could be, Bones. I think I'll go and see."

"Jim, are you sure?" the Doctor said quietly. "You know our Vulcan. Don't you think he would rather be left alone?"

"I believe he needs help, Bones."

McCoy shrugged and watched the Captain walk to the edge of the terrace where Spock brooded in solitary contemplation. The Vulcan remained motionless when Kirk paused at his side and rested his arms on the parapet. A moment of uneasy silence went by, then Kirk asked tentatively, "Spock... Spock? Are you all right?"

There was no reply. Kirk might have been parsecs away for all the

reaction he got from his friend. He attempted to reach the Vulcan's mind, but Spock had locked himself away behind his mental shields. Chilled by the lack of response, Kirk slowly fell back and was about to withdraw when, suddenly, the forbidding barriers were dropped and the familiar presence touched his mind.

//Jim, I regret... I cannot.../ He faltered, and Kirk felt with a shock the hurt and confusion raging in that usually calm and serene mind.

"T'Pring?" he asked gently.

"Yes..." Spock struggled for control, then whispered, "Jim, I never thought that a Vulcan could be so irrational, so spiteful."

"Well," Kirk replied philosophically, "now you know. Coming from that girl, nothing could surprise me. What exactly did she want?"

Spock sighed. "She said that she and Stonn intended to part so she wished me to renew our bonding... and I declined."

"Good Heavens. She had the gall to ask you that after what she did? The nerve of the girl! Good for you, Spock. I suppose she'll leave you alone now." A thought crossed his mind and he chuckled. "McCoy was right on the mark."

"McCoy?" An eyebrow shot up in dismay. "What has McCoy...?"

"Nothing. Except guess that you had turned T'Pring down."

"Indeed?" The other eyebrow joined its mate in the dark bangs. "How very perceptive of the Doctor. Human intuition, I suppose?"

"Must be," Kirk laughed, glad to see Spock recover his composure. "Do you mean to stay here all night? Come on, let's go home."

Spock straightened up and with another sigh, replied, "Yes, Jim. Let us go home."

Chapter 11

It was still early the next day when the trio alighted from the air-car in front of the Science Academy. Little had been said during the short flight as their thoughts had unconsciously drifted back to the previous day.

Late last night they had discussed the T'Pring affair in a quiet after-dinner chat by the pool. Spock, overcoming his innate reticence, had reported the encounter to his Captain and McCoy. The fact that both had been witnesses and actors in the drama enacted at Koon-utkal-if-fee entitled them to learn of T'Pring's presumptions and arguments. The telling had, not unexpectedly, sparked off some very biting comments from the Doctor.

Conjecture as to T'Pring's next move, if any, were put forward by both Humans, but Spock had refused to join in the illogical game of speculation and finally they had, by mutual consent, dropped the subject. To all intents and purposes the incident was closed.

Kirk knew however that Spock had been badly shaken and he had watched from his window as the Vulcan had paced the garden like a caged feline until well into the small hours. So when at breakfast McCoy had mentioned his appointment with the Healer T'Lian, Kirk had seized the opportunity to remind Spock of the Academy Gymnasium. He

knew from experience that there was nothing better than a good workout to release tension.

After leaving McCoy in the care of T'Lian's assistant, Spock shepherded his Captain across the Campus to the Academy Sports Centre which lay beyond the Botanic Garden. A riot of colours and fragrances greeted them as they strolled along the paths and Spock was irresistibly reminded of a green-eyed lady who had once walked by his side under these very trees. He was drawn away from these pleasant memories by Kirk who, favourably impressed by the park, insisted that McCoy would love it.

"You know, Spock, somehow, I never associated Vulcan with the concepts of farming and gardening. I don't know why... I think that I had better revise my judgment about your folks," he said with a mischievous look.

"If you believed all Vulcans to be diplomats, scientists and computer experts, then yes, Jim, I think you should." His look was returned in good measure.

Kirk's irrepressible laughter caused some disturbance among the local fauna and drew someone's attention. From behind a hedge of blooming shrubs a dry voice commented, "If I am not mistaken only a Human can produce that kind of syncopated sound. Interesting."

Taken aback, Kirk looked at Spock who simply lifted an enigmatic eyebrow. "Come," he said and led the way round the shrubbery. On the other side was a lily pond and sitting by its side was a frail-looking, white-haired individual who peered up at them with benevolent curiosity.

"Greetings, Professor," Spock intoned formally.

"Greetings, my boy," replied Professor Sradek, who looked the same as ever if not slightly more wrinkled. "So, you are back among us, and on leave I am told. Will you find time to visit your old teacher?"

"I shall be honoured, sir."

"Come any time. I have little activity now; a few seminars, a few classes. And who is this young man? The Captain of the Enterprise, I presume."

"Yes, sir. This is Captain James Kirk. Jim, Professor Sradek was my history teacher and my mentor when I was a student."

Kirk bowed, very conscious of the scrutiny to which he was being subjected by a pair of sharp eyes. "I am honoured, Professor."

"Are you? That is gratifying indeed from an officer of your reputation," was Sradek's caustic comment. "And what brings you two young men to this garden? An interest in botany?"

"We are on our way to the Gymnasium," Spock replied. "The Captain is desirous of testing his skill at Vulcan wrestling."

"Really?" The Professor looked mildly interested. "Then I will not keep you. Be sure to bring your Captain along when you come, Spock."

"I will, Sradek. Lash'D'Oro V'Suka."

"I like your old teacher, Spock," the Captain declared once they were well out of earshot. "He has a sense of humour. Rather an unusual character for a Vulcan, isn't he?"

"Indeed. Sradek has always been a

non-conformist with an inclination to infringe the rules when necessary. But then, Vulcans are not all cast in the same mould - as you ought to know."

"Sure, Mr Spock, and with a prime example at my side I have no excuse, have I?" Kirk rejoined cheerfully.

When the two friends walked into the Sports Centre Kirk paused, impressed by what he saw. The Enterprise could take pride in her well-fitted sports rooms but she could certainly not compete with this equipment, some of which was entirely new to him. As he watched Vulcans engaging in various athletic exercises and combat simulations Kirk was struck anew by the innate elegance which masked their fabulous strength, and which never failed to rouse his grudging admiration when he wrestled with his First Officer.

"Captain?"

He turned round and was introduced to Shundak, the Arms Master and Director of the establishment. He was a middle-aged man of impressive physique and faultless courtesy who raised a sceptical eyebrow when told that the Human visitor meant to participate and not just watch from the sidelines.

When Kirk and Spock exited the changing cubicles, clad in the de rigueur sleeveless jacket and loose breeches, Shundak gave them an appraising once-over then pointed to one of the mats. After a few warm-up exercises the pair swung into action. They launched into a light version of the V'Asumi combat, one which Spock had taught his Captain on board the Enterprise. He was an excellent teacher and Kirk, very conscious of Shundak's expert eye upon them, strove to do him credit.

The novel sight of a V'Asumi fought

by a Human and a Vulcan in this sanctum of Vulcan martial arts was bound to attract curiosity, and they soon found themselves watched by quite an audience. Their performance was apparently judged acceptable for when, after a last throw and shoulder roll, they stood up and bowed, several young men claimed the honour of standing up to them. Kirk found himself engaged with a strapping fellow while Spock joined some others in a sword fight.

The Captain was soon too occupied in dealing with the full Vulcan treatment to pay attention to Spock's doings. Despite his physical fitness and Fleet training Kirk was eventually pinned down on the mat and had to acknowledge defeat. The Vulcan pulled him to his feet and they were making their bows when Kirk suddenly felt a subtle change of atmosphere around him. Curiously, the air seemed to be loaded with tension, which should have been downright impossible with unemotional Vulcans.

Kirk spun round and saw Spock standing stock still facing several men. To his Captain, his posture and cool, aloof expression were clear evidence of an icy self-control retained despite extreme provocation.

"What's wrong? What's up?" Kirk asked the Vulcans around him.

Eyebrows went up. "Unknown, Captain Kirk."

"Who are those people?" he insisted. "Do you know them?"

Someone replied reluctantly. "Yes, some of them... Trail, Soniak, X'our, also Stonn, Sopeck..."

"Stonn?" Kirk cut in. "Did you say Stonn? Damn!" He strode off, leaving the Vulcans staring after him.

As soon as he stood at Spock's shoulder, Kirk felt a cold wave of hostility hit him like a slap in the face. With a feeling of *deja-vu*, he asked airily, "Everything all right, Mr Spock?"

"Perfectly, Captain," Spock replied calmly.

Kirk was not welcome. That much was obvious to judge from the hostile stares turned on him. Uncaring, he gave the Vulcans as good as he got with one of his famous command glares designed to freeze incompetent subordinates on the spot. The Vulcans' stares turned arctic and Stonn, bigger and older than Kirk remembered him, pushed forward, exuding scorn.

"What is Kirk doing here? This is no place for outworlders, Spock. Tell the Human to leave."

For Spock's sake Kirk bit back an angry retort and asked under his breath, "Spock, need some help?"

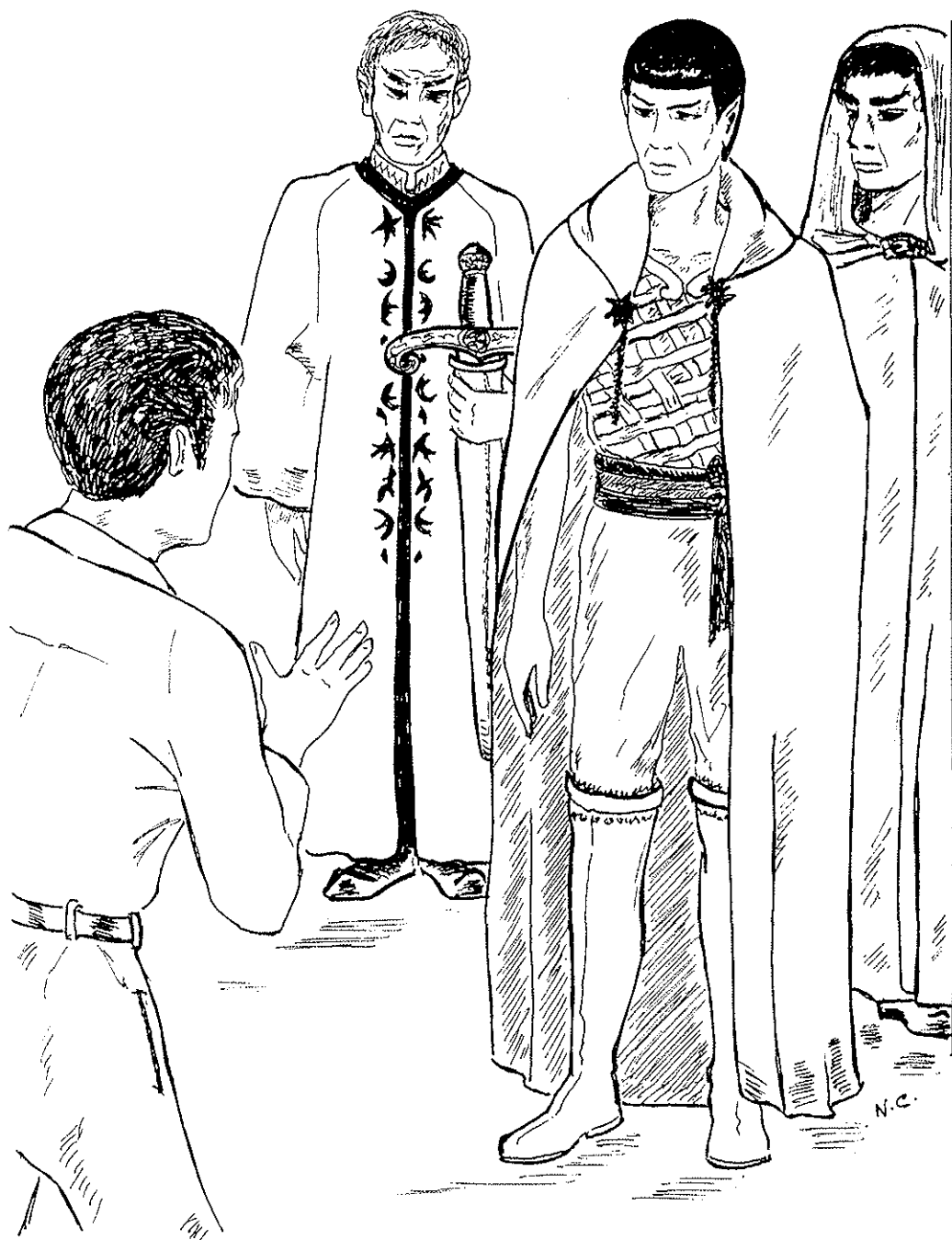
"No, Jim. Please stay out of this. I have to settle this matter alone," Spock firmly replied.

The Captain knew better than to insist. He laid a hand on his friend's shoulder, then drew back a few steps and found the Arms Master standing at his shoulder and looking none too pleased with the situation.

"Captain Kirk," he intimated in a low voice, "I recommend that you pay heed to Spock's words. Whatever happens, do not interfere."

"I understand, but I am not in the habit of letting my friends face trouble alone."

"Your loyalty is commendable, Kirk, but do not be concerned for Spock,"



Shundak replied grimly. "Whatever the outcome, I shall see to it that the rules are observed. I shall allow no-one to be wronged in my Gymnasium."

Kirk nodded appreciatively. At least he could rely on the dour Vulcan for support. "Thank you, Shundak," he quietly replied while all the time he was watching Spock, who was calmly and steadily denying whatever it was that Stonn was accusing him of.

They were speaking in their native tongue and Kirk chafed at not being able to understand exactly what Spock was being blamed for. His lean face remained dark and inscrutable despite the provocation of Stonn and his supporters, who were visibly trying to force Spock out of his maddening calm.

Who said that Vulcans are peace-loving creatures? Kirk thought as his friend flinched under a particularly vicious attack. "What was that? What did they say?" he demanded in frustration at his helplessness.

"Steady, Kirk. Be silent," Shundak grunted, grim and watchful.

A murmur of shocked disapproval arose from the onlookers when Stonn again threw defiant words at Spock who, though as white as a sheet, remained impassive and quietly repeated a flat denial. Incensed with the half-Vulcan's tight self-control, Stonn shouted what sounded like a ritual curse and deliberately hit Spock with a sweeping back-handed blow that would have felled an ox.

A wave of cold indignation ran around the hall and Kirk felt his blood boil. Spock stood like a rock, eyes blazing in his ashen face. Shundak, looking outraged, was now at Spock's side and he spoke briefly in a stern voice. Kirk made

to follow but a hand caught at his arm and a voice said, not unkindly, in his ear, "No, Kirk. Do not go."

"What the hell is going on?" he insisted in exasperation. "What was that?"

"It was the Kun K'Alaish Kae, the Warrior's Challenge, Captain."

The hall fairly crackled with pent-up tension, as if all the passions the Vulcans were not supposed to have were about to explode. Kirk felt sure as he looked at the men around him that it would not take much to crack the Vulcan veneer and let the wild instincts of their clans surge up from their past. All eyes were now fixed on Spock, watching, waiting for his move. He just stood there, icily remote, keeping Stonn locked in his steely glare.

Stonn hesitated, then urged on by his followers he again shouted the challenge.

"Kun K'Alaish Kae! You cowering half-breed!" and he raised a menacing hand ready to strike again.

The insult stung Spock into action. With lightning speed, he gripped Stonn's fist and slowly, inexorably forced it down. His dark eyes never left the other's face as he spoke the ritual acceptance.

"Kun K'Alaish Farr!" Then releasing his grip Spock stepped back and let Shundak take over.

No-one tried to stop the Captain when he sidled up to his friend and whispered, "Spock, what does all this mean, for Heaven's sake? Are you going to fight a duel?"

"Yes, Captain. I accepted the challenge."

"Why? What for? Has Stonn gone off his head?"

"Not here, Captain, please. Later." Spock cut in hastily.

"All right, later then. But I want some answers, Mr Spock," Kirk retorted. If his First Officer was to risk his life in combat on Vulcan he had to know why.

It took some time for Shundak and Stonn's supporters to confer about the necessary arrangements and Kirk had to curb his impatience. When Spock finally came over and calmly said, "I am sorry to have kept you waiting, Jim. We are finished now and I believe it is time for us to join McCoy in the Cafeteria," the Captain felt definitely downtrodden, a condition he disliked intensely.

"And that's all you got to say?" he protested.

"Captain Kirk," Shundak put in solemnly, "no more must be said on the subject. You must make no mention of the combat."

"But at least, tell me where... and when."

A look, touched with embarrassment, passed between the two Vulcans. "I regret, Captain, we cannot," Spock told him.

"Why, for Pete's sake?" Kirk demanded.

Shundak looked at him and declared, "Because the D'Alik'Tal duel is now illegal, Captain."

"...and that, Bones, had me floored, good and proper," Kirk concluded to a bemused Doctor, several hours later.

"Can you imagine these righteous Vulcans breaking the law without the least compunction."

"But duels were abolished ages ago in the Federation. This is grotesque," McCoy argued.

"True, but this is a Vulcan affair of honour, Bones."

"Isn't this something. We've hardly been here four days before Spock gets himself embroiled in a ritual fight. Why didn't he refuse the challenge in the first place?" McCoy asked in exasperation.

"He couldn't, Bones. Shundak said that Spock was honour-bound to accept. His reputation and that of the Clan were at stake. He did what was expected of him," Kirk replied bitterly.

"It was the logical thing to do," McCoy quoted sarcastically. "Since it's illegal, how can they get away it? By now it must be all over ShiKahr."

"I think not, Bones. According to their code of honour any witnesses to a Warrior's Challenge are pledged to secrecy."

"Yeah, but you're not Vulcan, Jim. What is there to stop you from reporting it to the authorities and preventing this nonsense?"

"I can't," Kirk said tightly. "Spock made me swear not to breathe a word to anyone, except you, and you can be sure that the household here won't speak. So it looks like we are confronted with a situation over which we have no control and which may cost Spock his life. Damn!" He hit the chair arm in exasperation. "It's so frustrating! Why... why this challenge? It doesn't make sense."

"Are you sure, Jim?" the Doctor asked shrewdly. "Looks to me like a put-up job... Oh, thank you, Staurak. Just what we need," he said to the old Vulcan, who had set a tray down beside them.

"Has Spock come back, yet?" Kirk asked.

"Not yet, Captain. You will be informed the moment he returns."

"Sorry, Staurak." Kirk smiled at the austere face. "You understand we are worried about Spock."

The Vulcan bent a wise gaze upon them. "I do, sir, so I took the liberty of serving drinks. Humans are often more patient when they have something to do."

"Very well observed, Staurak. How is T'Mina?" McCoy asked kindly. The Doctor was well aware of the old couple's concern about the affair although they would have died rather than admit to it. Staurak's face took on a remote expression. "She is... distressed, Doctor; quite distressed," he admitted simply and turned to go.

Kirk stopped him. "Staurak, wait, please. I'm told this duel is illegal but that it has to happen because it is an old tradition. Isn't there someone in Shikahr with enough authority to enforce the law and forbid the fight without transgressing your traditions? Someone of your Clan?"

"No, Captain. The Clan has been wronged and challenged in the person of Spock and it must be avenged in ritual combat," the Vulcan said stiffly.

"I understand that," Kirk said impatiently, "but, dammit, this is Spock we're talking about! T'Pau is the Head of the Family, isn't she? I'm sure she could prevent the fight."

Staurak hesitated a fraction of a second, then replied, "No, sir. As a female she is not entitled to make a decision on the matter. Affairs of honour are restricted to male involvement only."

"Oh? So, who is the male Head of the Clan?"

"Sarek, Captain."

Kirk exchanged a crestfallen look with McCoy who said heavily, "And Sarek is parsecs away, Jim."

"Blast!" Kirk muttered. "When do you expect him back? Another couple of days? And the combat?"

"Tomorrow at daybreak," Staurak replied.

"Sarek will be too late. There's no way..." Kirk mused, "unless... Who comes next to Sarek in the Clan's hierarchy?" he asked hopefully.

A barely audible sigh escaped the old Vulcan who replied, "Spock, sir."

"Well that's that, Jim. Back to square one," McCoy commented. "Seems there's nothing we can do."

"There must be, Bones. There has to be!" Kirk repeated angrily. "I can't believe that..."

"The Doctor is right, Captain," a deep voice said behind them. "Nothing can or should be done against our traditions." Spock, with his usual silent grace, had come in unnoticed. He took off his cloak and handed it Staurak before sitting down next to Kirk.

"Shall I bring you a drink, Spock?" Staurak asked.

"Yes. One of your 'specials', please." Staurak left leaving Spock to cope with his emotional friends.

Staurak was hardly out of hearing range when the Captain pounced. "Now, Spock, no more evasions, no more mysteries. I want the truth. You'll tell me what this is all about or I'll report you to the High Council."

Spock knew that Kirk's sharpness covered his genuine concern and he did his best to ease the tension. "Blackmail, Captain?" he replied, eyebrow on the rise. "Unworthy of you and quite unnecessary, I assure you."

"Is it? Then out with it," Kirk demanded.

His First Officer leisurely crossed his legs and joined his fingertips in their customary lecturing position, but the others could tell that beneath his outward composure he was under considerable pressure.

"It seems," Spock declared in a carefully neutral voice, "that I am accused of attempting to seduce T'Pring and to force a mindmeld in order to break her bond with Stonn."

The two Humans blinked. "But... but... that's insane!" Kirk expostulated. "Who could believe that yarn?"

"Stonn and his friends, obviously," was the calm reply.

"That's pure slander. Didn't you tell Stonn what she's been doing? Didn't you tell them the truth?"

"I did, but as you know, 'there are none so deaf as those who will not hear'. They did not believe me."

"Then why didn't you call me? I

could have testified for you," Kirk insisted.

Spock shook his head. "Useless, Jim. As an outworlder and my friend your word would have no value."

"You know," McCoy put in, "what beats me is that T'Pring could tell such a pack of lies and get away with it. However, the duel still doesn't make sense. I mean, why did Stonn challenge you since he is seeking a divorce? Surely this is a golden opportunity to get rid of T'Pring?"

"According to Stonn, Doctor, there is no question of a separation," Spock replied dryly.

Kirk whistled. "So... another lie of T'Pring's? Or do you think it was wishful thinking?"

Spock raised a disillusioned eyebrow. "I could not say, Captain. I find myself totally incapable of forming an opinion on T'Pring's reasoning and motivations."

"No wonder," McCoy snorted. "I'm sure that anyone else as devious and unpredictable as that girl would be hard to find. Who said that Vulcans never lie? Or is it a myth?"

"No, McCoy, Vulcans do not lie. However this one has done and as I have learnt to my cost, she is an expert." The bitterness in Spock's voice sounded like an echo of the shock and betrayal he had felt that morning when he had realised what T'Pring had done.

A pause followed, then McCoy cleared his throat and said heartily, "At any rate, T'Pring must be the exception which proves the rule judging by the very nice ladies we have met in ShiKahr so far." The knowing look he shot at Spock

was received with studied indifference.

The Vulcan merely said, "Perhaps you are right, Doctor." He got to his feet. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have preparations to make."

Kirk was also on his feet. "Spock, are you sure that you want to go through with this?"

"It is not what I want but what I must do, Captain. I cannot shirk my duty," was the cool reply.

"Granted, but isn't there a more logical, more civilised way to settle this quarrel? Kirk argued. "Don't you see that both you and Stonn are playing right into T'Pol's hands?"

"I do. Unfortunately the only answer to a Kun K'Alaish Kae is a duel."

"For Heaven's sake, Spock, why do you have to conform with these stupid, bloody customs of yours?" McCoy wanted to know.

Spock drew himself up with aloof dignity. "Because I am Vulcan, Doctor. Do not forget that."

Kirk and McCoy exchanged a resigned look. "Okay then," the Captain sighed. "If there's no way to stop you, you can at least tell us what kind of fight the D'Alak'Tal you spoke about is."

"It is a ritual combat with sword and dagger; traditional weapons similar to those I have in my quarters."

"Oh?" The Doctor looked surprised. "You mean that you can handle all that arsenal of yours? I thought that you only had them up for show."

A disdainful eyebrow lifted in answer. "Be logical, Doctor. What

purpose would I have in keeping those weapons if I could not, as you say, 'handle' them?"

Kirk and McCoy traded a startled glance at the thought of the deadly armament that bedecked Spock's cabin wall. So much for non-violent Vulcans.

"Quite," the Captain said soberly. "Now, Spock, is there anything we can do in the meantime?"

"No, Jim. Staurak is quite capable of attending to my needs and the Family armoury is well provided."

"Right. One last thing then; what time do we leave?" Kirk enquired.

Both slanted eyebrows climbed to Spock's hairline. "We, Captain?"

"Of course! You don't imagine that we're going to let you go to that cut-throat party alone, do you?" Kirk retorted. "If memory serves one needs both a second and a physician in a duel."

"I'm sorry, Captain, but that is out of the question," Spock stated stiffly.

"On the contrary, Mr Spock," Kirk bristled, "that is very much the question. Either we go with you or there will be no duel and that's flat."

Spock paled perceptibly. "That is impossible, Captain. You are not Vulcan, you cannot be my second and a challenge given and accepted cannot be cancelled by anyone."

"Oh? What about Sarek?" Kirk shot back.

Spock stiffened. "Sarek? How do you know about Sarek?"

"Information received," the Captain

countered.

"It is irrelevant. Sarek is away," Spock stated curtly.

"That much we know. Therefore, we are going with you. Dammit, Spock. We went to your marriage ceremony, why can't we go to its aftermath?"

"Captain," Spock said tightly, "as outworlders you cannot attend a ritual combat and that is final."

Kirk realised that as far as Spock was concerned that was the end of the matter but as a last resort he tried another tack. "Very well," he said with a shrug. "You force me to pull rank, Mr Spock. As your senior officer I can order you to decline combat and traditions be damned. Or I can report you to Starfleet or the Vulcan High Council and have you put under arrest for the illegal use of dangerous weapons, and I have a good mind to do just that. You see - I have the means to stop you."

For a few painful heartbeats Spock, his face a frozen mask, stared at his Captain. Then, he said tonelessly, "You cannot, Captain. This is Vulcan." Turning on his heel he stalked out leaving Kirk seething with frustration.

Into the tense silence a quiet voice fell, "He's right, Jim." Doctor McCoy had listened to his friends' altercation with growing concern and he now thought he should intervene. "He is right. This is not the Enterprise, this is Vulcan. You are on their turf, Captain."

Furious, Kirk rounded on McCoy, "Is that all you've got to say? How about backing me up?"

"Jim, be reasonable. You should know by now that you can't win any argument with a Vulcan, much less one

which concerns Vulcan rites and ethics. I hate to admit it, but Spock is right. You can't order him about on his own land."

Kirk paced the room restlessly for a few moments, then shrugged hopelessly. "Do you think I don't know that, Bones? I was just trying to... Oh, damn!" He slumped into a chair and wiped a weary hand across his face.

McCoy eyed him warily then remarked, "Don't you think that you were a bit hard on Spock? I mean, he has enough to cope with just now, Vulcans and all, without having our emotions thrown at him into the bargain."

"I know. But why can't I go with him? We've gone through hell and high water together; why do I now have to let him go alone?"

"You heard him, Jim. This is purely a Vulcan matter and I don't think there is a damn thing we can do," McCoy replied fatalistically.

"I can't believe that, Bones. There's got to be a way," Kirk insisted and resumed his anxious pacing.

At about the same time a young woman was repeating the same words with the same determination. "No. It is impossible. Surely there must be a way." She was sitting by her telescreen unit, still in shock from a confidential communication from T'Lian, her mother's sister. The Healer had been apprised of the Kun K'Alaish Kae by one of her medical assistants who had witnessed the incident and who, for obvious reasons, had deemed it his duty to report to his senior. T'Lian aware of T'Kahalin's regard for Spock had in her turn judged that she ought to be informed and had told her, in confidence, how Spock had

been confronted and challenged in the Gymnasium.

According to T'Lian's informant the reason for Stonn's incredible action was not quite clear but he had believed that Stonn's bondmate was involved. T'Lian had added that although she strongly disapproved of these secret Warrior rites there was unfortunately nothing she could do except have her intensive care unit ready for an emergency. This was all quite regrettable but then men were strange creatures indeed.

With those last words the Healer had closed contact, leaving her niece stunned by the news. Although she agreed with T'Lian's disillusioned comment, T'Kahalin could not accept the inevitability of the combat. "Think! Think. Surely, something can be done," she whispered, racking her brain for inspiration, for any expedient. Alas, she had to admit that faced by Vulcan tradition she was helpless and all the more so since she was sworn to secrecy.

As that knowledge filled her with anger and despair she suddenly realised that she was being irrational. If there was nothing to be done, why did she feel outrage... distress? These were emotions she should not allow herself to experience... and yet, her feverish mind unconsciously conjured up an image of Spock lying slain on the red sand. She could not repress a shudder. Illogical. Unworthy of a Vulcan but.. was it? As a Vulcan did she not owe it to herself to prevent a wrong from being done? Was it not her duty to her people to spare them the loss of their most brilliant son, the man who had been awarded the Surak Prize medal by the Supreme Council?

Again memories flooded unbidden into her mind: Spock... Spock gazing at her across a crowded hall; Spock talking

quietly with T'Lian at dinner but somehow conveying the impression that his attention had been on herself; and this very day, when he and the Captain had unexpectedly turned up at the Cafeteria, she had several times surprised him looking at her with an intensity which had made her wonder... as if he wished to imprint her features in his memory, as if it were the last time he would see her.

Her heart missed a beat. Perhaps it *had* been for the last time. Immediately she rebelled at the thought. Spock of Vulcan, risking his life in an archaic fight that no-one had heard of since Surak? It did not bear thinking about, all the more since T'Pring seemed to be the cause.

At that name, a surge of unreasoning resentment washed over T'Kahalin. That woman had rejected Spock some years ago. Could she not leave him alone now? Obviously T'Pring had found a way to set Stonn against Spock, but for what obscure reason only she could tell. T'Kahalin was sure that T'Pring's astute mind had orchestrated the whole plot and that she had pitted her bondmate against her former betrothed just as she had earlier managed to place Spock in opposition to his Captain. Naturally she knew how to keep her strategy within the law and within her own rights. No-one, not even T'Pau could find any fault to...

T'Kahalin sat up, suddenly struck by an inspiration. T'Pau! Yes of course; T'Pau as the Head of the Clan must be able to do something to prevent the combat. Wasn't she the Guardian of the Traditions? T'Pau had to be told at once; her promise of secrecy surely did not include T'Pau?

First, though, she had to learn more about the Warrior's ritual combats. Quickly she used her computer to access the Library's archival banks. An

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enormous amount of data concerning the Pre-Reformation Clans and Brotherhoods was produced and her computer sorted it, reducing it to the essentials, namely that the ritual fights always took place at dawn at an appointed place known only to the participants.

T'Kahalin leaned back in her chair and sighed. Dawn... she mused, *it is well into the night now. There is no time to spare.* She punched T'Pau's co-ordinates in and was confronted by the sour face of a secretary who stated that T'Pau was engaged and could not be disturbed at that moment; she should call again. Knowing from experience that an argument would be useless, T'Kahalin coolly replied, "Then I have to request a private meeting on an urgent matter."

"It is very late. T'Pau will not receive you," was the stern reply.

"She will because it is a matter of life and death. Please tell her to expect me in half an hour," T'Kahalin said with confidence.

"Very well. I shall do so," replied the disapproving secretary, who now had a gleam of curiosity in his eyes.

T'Kahalin switched off the video-com with a snap and swiftly changed into comfortable clothes and with a warm, hooded cloak over her shoulders went to the back of the house where she had parked her small air-car. As she sped through the night towards T'Pau's house she marshalled her thoughts in preparation for her interview with the formidable old lady. Curiously it never occurred to her that T'Pau might refuse to receive her or decline to intervene; nor that Spock might take exception to her interference in an affair of honour. She was so determined to thwart T'Pring's machinations that she never gave it a thought.

Silence reigned in Sarek's house, a silence only occasionally broken by stealthy footsteps and hushed voices.

"It's as if they were already in mourning," Kirk commented bitterly while he sipped his coffee in Amanda's sitting room.

"Jim, you really are over-reacting," McCoy chided, swirling brandy in a balloon glass. "Why are you assuming that Spock's going to fail? He's in peak condition and quite capable of defeating Stonn."

"You haven't seen Stonn. He's as strong and as big as a bull, Bones."

"Well I did see him at that ceremony, and I admit that then I had my doubts as Spock was debilitated with the blood fever, but it's different now, Jim. He does have a fighting chance to win, believe me."

"Anything to raise my spirits, eh, Doctor?" Kirk remarked.

"It's the simple truth, Captain. I do know what I am talking about," McCoy replied. "Where's he gone? He vanished like a ghost after dinner."

"He said something about retiring to meditate," Kirk replied, staring into the log fire the servants had kindled for them.

McCoy watched him covertly, observing that his mood was becoming increasingly gloomy. Dinner had not been particularly cheerful and no wonder, but the strain between his two friends seemed to have gone, thank goodness. One thing had somewhat lightened the general mood though when in answer to a question from McCoy, Spock had replied that he was prepared and fit,

having spent a couple of hours practising in Sarek's armoury.

"By yourself?" Jim had asked, looking surprised. "You should have called me, Spock. Although I don't have Sulu's skills I'm pretty handy at swordfighting."

"Not this kind of swordplay, Captain," the Vulcan had replied. "It takes years of training to handle these weapons. I had Staurak to fight with me."

McCoy could not believe it. "Old Staurak? You must be kidding?"

"Staurak may be 195 years old, Doctor," Spock's voice was mildly amused, "but that does not stop him from still being one of the foremost fencing masters in ShiKahr. He and Shundak taught me everything I know."

"Bones." Kirk emerged from his pensive mood. "Have you noticed that no-one is willing to tell us much about this duel? It's as if it's a guilty secret... which I suppose it is; after all it is illegal. I wonder if we could obtain some information from official sources, libraries, archives etc..."

"Fat lot of good that is, Jim. Unless you can understand Vulcanur?" was the Doctor's caustic reply.

"Damn!" Kirk swore in exasperation. "It's at times like this I miss my ship. I'd have had the information from the library computer in no time..."

A soft tinkle interrupted him and drew their attention to a telescreen unit and its flashing light.

"What do we do?" wondered McCoy.

"We just stay put, unless you can

speak Vulcanur," Kirk countered.

A young man-servant came in, turned on the device and spoke a few words. Having switched it off he'd turned to leave when Kirk stopped him.

"Oh excuse me... I have to make a call but I don't know the number. Is there a directory that I can use?"

"Yes, sir, but there is a code."

"Naturally; and in Vulcanur, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. Can I be of assistance?"

"I would appreciate it," Kirk replied, and rose to his feet.

"Jim? What are you up to?" muttered a non-plussed Doctor.

"Just an idea, Bones. Don't you fret."

McCoy watched curiously as Kirk took his place at the console while the Vulcan punched the code, sending lines of data streaming across the screen.

"I hope that it is not discourteous to call a person at this hour of the night," Kirk remarked belatedly.

"No, sir, otherwise I would have told you," the young man replied. "Here you are, Captain, Professor Sradek." He touched a key then silently departed.

McCoy, who was now standing at Kirk's shoulder, asked curiously, "And who the heck is Professor Sradek, Jim?"

"Spock's teacher. Hush now," Kirk said as the old Vulcan's face shimmered into view. "Greetings Professor. This is James Kirk. If you remember we met this morning in the park."

"My memory is unimpaired, young man," Sradek dryly replied. "I do remember you, the friend of Spock. What is the object of your call?"

"A point of history, Professor. We were discussing the legendary warriors of your past and one question arose which Spock, unfortunately, could not answer. So, I thought that perhaps you would be so good as to..."

"Kindly come to the point, Captain," Sradek asked.

"Well, it concerns challenges and ritual combats. To be precise the... er... D'Alik'Tal; the duel with sword and dagger, I believe? Can you tell me if that was purely symbolic, to save face, so to speak, or a real fight?"

A pair of thin eyebrows rose up to the snow-white hair. "Captain, be sure that when the warriors fought it was to kill. The D'Alik'Tal, one of the barbarities of our savage past, alas, was no pretence but a duel to the death that few men survived. I am surprised at Spock, he should have known that. That period was one of his strong points."

Kirk shot a grim look at McCoy and muttered, "Hear that, Bones? This is worse than I thought." Then with forced geniality he asked Sradek, "I suppose I'm right that these combats have not been practised since Surak's Reformation, Professor?"

"Quite right, Kirk. They were abolished along with other cruel customs. However there are recurring rumours concerning occult brotherhoods which still practice the Warriors' rites, including combat to the death. Whether there is any truth in them I could not say.

"Normally these traditional combats are only performed as sporting contests,

by the young men of our Academies, at annual competitions. They require, particularly the D'Alik'Tal, considerable skill, strength and judgement. I recall that Spock excelled at those games when he was at the Science Academy. Why could he not tell you all this? I cannot understand." Sradek's face wrinkled in mild disapproval.

Kirk assumed an air of deceptive ignorance. "I could not say, Professor. Perhaps a memory block?" To cover up this slander he added hastily, "One more question, please? I understand that the Warlords always went attended by friends and followers. I suppose that also goes for individual combats?"

"Certainly. They went into battle escorted by their close friends, their Thyl'as and by several attendants, a custom which led to further bloodshed as the escorts also used to fight."

"I see..." Kirk paused, then asked, "I assume then that these close friends necessarily belonged to the Warriors' clans, or there would have been objections."

"Not at all. Why should there be? On Vulcan, a friend is a friend, Captain; his origin, his creed or race make no difference. You ought to know that." Sradek's eyes twinkled.

Kirk mustered a grin. "I do indeed, sir, and I am very grateful for the information, more than you can conceive."

The Professor acknowledged with a nod. "It is gratifying to be still of service, Captain. Will you do me a favour? Please tell Spock to read up on our Pre-Reformation history as a recommendation from his old teacher."

"I won't forget. Good night,

Professor."

Sradek's face vanished from the screen and Kirk walked slowly back to the fireplace where he stood staring grimly at the dancing flames. A hand gripped his shoulder.

"Are you all right, Jim?" McCoy asked somewhat concerned.

Kirk grunted, then said, "You heard him, Bones. You heard what he said. 'Friends, whoever they are, have the right to attend the combats'. So what Spock told us was a lie, damn him!"

"Jim, come on. Perhaps he..." the Doctor began.

"No, Bones," Kirk cut him short. "It was deliberate." He turned about to face McCoy. "I remember that you once told me that the simple fact that Spock is a Vulcan means he is incapable of telling a lie.... So, what do you have to say now, Doctor."

Faced with a pair of blazing hazel eyes McCoy cleared his throat and said diffidently, "Yes, well... I admit that Spock hasn't been exactly frank about this Warriors' business. So what? He's done that, like everything he does, for logical reasons, and you know damn well what those reasons are."

Hazel eyes and blue eyes met and held fiercely, then Kirk turned back to the fire and leaned an arm on the mantelpiece. "Do I?" he said presently, all anger spent.

"Dammit, Jim. Can't you see what's staring you in the face? Don't you understand that all he is doing is trying to spare you? He learned his lesson the last time he invited us, didn't he? It was his right to bring his friends to his marriage ceremony, he said, and the next thing he

knew he had to fight and kill his best friend. And today, it's not a marriage, it's a fight to the death that he's involved with. No wonder he's determined to keep you out of it," McCoy rasped. Then with a muttered profanity he sank into his chair and refilled his glass.

After a moment Kirk heaved a sigh and sat down beside him, hunched over his clasped hands. "I know all that," he said presently, "and that is the crux of the problem. He won't let me go with him for the same reasons that I cannot let him go alone. So, what do we do now? If you've any ideas, Bones, then now's the time."

The Doctor took a sip of brandy and shrugged. "Since you and Spock are as stubborn as each other, seems to me you're facing deadlock, Jim. I can't see any solution - short of going on our own and sort of dropping in on them once the duel has started."

"You're a big help. We don't know the place, it's being kept secret."

"And, of course, Spock won't tell," McCoy added. After a pause he added, "How much time until dawn? Do you know?"

"Three or four hours, I suppose," Kirk muttered listlessly.

Soft footfalls and a rustle of fabric heralded Staurak's appearance in the pool of light. "Your pardon, gentlemen. I had thought you had retired to your rooms. Shall I bring you some food and drink?"

"We'd rather wait here, Staurak. We didn't feel like going to bed when Spock... Er... yes, we could do with some coffee. Very strong coffee, please."

"And," added McCoy, "if you could make one of your 'specials' to keep me

awake, I would appreciate it."

"I have just what you need, Doctor," the Vulcan said and was gone.

When he returned carrying a pot of steaming coffee and a decanter glittering with amber liquid, the Doctor eyed the liquor warily.

"That's supposed to help me stay awake all night?" he asked.

"It does for Vulcans," Staurak replied imperturbably.

"Okay then, we'll try it," the Captain decided. "Have you seen Spock? Is he still meditating?" he asked.

"No, Captain. He is asleep now."

"Good. That's the best thing he could do," McCoy declared. "By the way, you said that the duel is to take place at dawn. Do you know where?"

"Yes, Doctor," Staurak briefly replied.

"Ah... and where is that?" Both men waited expectantly.

Staurak looked at them, then dropped his gaze. "I cannot say. I regret, Doctor, but Spock specifically requested that neither of you be told."

The two friends shared a glance and the Captain quietly said, "That's all right, Staurak. We understand. Maybe you can tell us when Spock is due to leave?"

"When the time comes his escort will take him to the appointed place."

"Oh... then you aren't going with him? I would have thought at least..." Kirk stopped, moved by the distress he could see in the Vulcan's eyes.

"So had I, Captain," Staurak replied with an effort, "but Spock expressly forbade me to accompany him."

"So as to spare you, as well," Kirk said kindly. "Then you know how we feel about it."

"I do, indeed, Captain," Staurak replied with a sigh.

"...And what is so important as to make you forget your manners and pay calls in the middle of the night?" was the greeting T'Kahalin received when she was at last ushered into T'Pau's chamber.

"I beg forgiveness, T'Pau, but it is a matter of the utmost urgency. It is information I received in confidence but of which you ought to be informed."

T'Pau gave the girl a searching look and noted her pale cheeks and anxious eyes. This did seem to be a serious matter. "Indeed," she replied. "You said in your message that it was a question of life and death... is that not excessive?"

"It is the truth... and it concerns Spock." T'Kahalin said simply. Now she had T'Pau's full attention.

"Spock?" she said sharply. "What do you mean, child? Explain."

In a few words T'Kahalin told her all she knew, but whatever hopes she had were dashed when after listening in shocked silence the old lady shook her head.

"I cannot interfere, T'Kahalin. These affairs of honour concern only the males of the Clans."

"But don't you have the authority as the Head of the Clan?"

"No, child. I have no authority in this matter. Spock did the correct thing in accepting the challenge and he must now accept the consequences. Do not interrupt, let me finish. Only one man in the Clan has the power, if he so chooses, to oppose the Warriors, and that is Sarek."

"But Sarek... Sarek has been gone for a week," T'Kahalin exclaimed in dismay. Then, struck by a sudden thought, she whispered, "Of course... Now I understand..."

"What do you understand? Speak."

"Don't you see, T'Pau? Stonn challenged Spock at a time when Sarek is away. They must have known that no-one but Sarek could prevent the combat so they planned the moment with care."

"They? Stonn's family?" T'Pau interjected.

"Possibly, but according to T'Lian's assistant, the cause or pretext for the Kun Kalaish Kae is T'Pring," T'Kahalin explained.

The old Vulcan lady stiffened in outrage. "Impossible. Spock would not disgrace himself with Stonn's bondmate. That is unthinkable."

"T'Pau," T'Kahalin said deliberately, "I have reason to believe that some perfidy is at work. I submit that T'Pring is quite capable of thinking up the whole scheme for reasons of her own and of using her bondmate if it suits her purpose."

T'Pau regarded her with speculative interest. "You are a perceptive girl, T'Kahalin, and if I know T'Pring you may well be right. Come, we must do something about it." She stood up, picked up her cane and walked briskly to the door.

"Where are we going? What do you mean to do?" asked the young woman as she hurried after her.

"I shall not let it be said that T'Pau could be outmanoeuvred by Stonn's chattel," retorted the indomitable Vulcan. "I may have no authority over male customs and rites but I hope that I still have some influence over that Starfleet Commander who dares break the law while abiding by our traditions. We must make haste."

After traversing the arcades they entered the hall. T'Pau halted and said shortly, "You came in your air-car, I presume. Good. We may just have the time. Come... take me to Sarek's house. Samorr, my cloak."

The door opened stealthily and a figure stole into the dark room and listened to the even breathing of the sleeping man. As it quietly approached the bed the flickering flame of the fire-pot showed the lined features in strong relief and revealed Staurak. He laid the clothes he had brought down on a chair and holding his breath gazed at Spock, who lay sound asleep with one arm thrown over his head. Spock's face looked peaceful, almost child-like, and conjured up the memory of the lonely boy whom Staurak and T'Mina had devotedly looked after. The old couple had always considered Spock as the son they had never had.... and now he had to prepare him for a deadly combat and for whatever fate awaited out on the desert. At the thought the old man felt a pang of anguish and his lips trembled uncontrollably. Overcoming his lapse, he schooled his face into its usual placidity and laid a gentle hand on the bare shoulder.

Spock's eyes snapped open

instantly and he looked up at the face above him. The long gaze they exchanged made words unnecessary. Staurak stepped back as Spock threw back the coverlet, stood up and stretched himself like a lithe cat before padding to the bathroom for a quick shower.

As Spock stared at his reflection in the mirror and took stock of himself he felt, with relief, that the stress he had endured all day long was gone. It had been a harrowing day, a constant effort to maintain self-control and dignity. After the shock of Stonn's shameful accusations and the challenge he had had to sustain first the emotional strain of facing T'Kahalin without betraying himself and then to confront his Captain's emotional arguments.

With his forceful ways, and his Human emotions on the rampage, Jim had unknowingly harassed him almost to breaking point. Jim's friendship, which he prized above all else, had been almost too much to cope with. He had even been forced to lie to his Captain but then he would have said or done anything to keep Kirk out of this conflict. Much as he longed to have Kirk at his side, Spock would not again risk his life. He shuddered at the memory of his friend lying choked to death by his hands. No! Never again. Closing his eyes in a desperate effort to banish the intrusive emotions Spock brought himself under tight control.

Moments later when Spock came out of the bathroom he had regained his usual composure. Staurak had laid out the traditional outfit of the D'Alík'Tal duellist - midnight blue breeches, tan knee-high boots and green fencing jacket - and now he proceeded to dress his charge with the gravity of a equerry fitting his master with a suit of armour. He fitted the shoulder straps and the net-like jacket with care, twined the three

traditional coloured belts the three times around Spock's waist and tied the ritual knots in the proper way.

Stepping back to check his handiwork he answered Spock's querying gaze with a nod of approval. The same thought crossed both their minds; so many times before had Staurak dressed the youth and given him his last recommendations before he entered the annual Competitions at the Academy. Now the circumstances were tragically different and soon, when dawn broke over the desert, would come the moment of truth. Spock deliberately broke the spell by taking out of the wardrobe a full length cloak which he slung over his shoulders, while Staurak picked up the weapons encased in their long leather sheath.

As they went to the door the faint throb of an air-car landing outside caught their attention.

"It is time, Spock. They are here," said Staurak opening the door.

"Wait. My friends? Have they retired to their rooms?" Spock asked.

"No. The last time I looked into your mother's sitting room they were sitting by the fire. They are waiting for you."

Spock paused, bit his lip, then murmured, "Kaidth." He strode out of the room, only to find a small woman, her wrinkled face drawn with distress, waiting for him on the landing. Her faded eyes looked up at Spock as she whispered, "Spockam, my little one. Must you go?"

Spock took her hands in his own. "You know it is my duty, T'Mina."

"Your duty," she protested feebly.

"What shall I say to your mother, to Sarek, if their son comes to harm?"

"Do not talk nonsense, my wife," chided Staurak. "Spock will return victorious, an honour to the Family. You may be sure of that."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Wishful thinking, Staurak?" he asked.

"No, Spock. Logical certainty," the Vulcan answered with stout confidence.

"So be it. Take care, Spock," T'Mina said softly. She held her hand out, palm upward and he gently touched it with his own. Then with a last look she let him go and watched the two men walk downstairs.

As they stole past the fountain which babbled quietly in its porphyry basin, the front door opened and two cloaked figures entered. The taller, one pushing back his hood, revealed the solemn face of Shundak.

"Greetings, Spock. Are you ready?" he asked in a hushed voice.

"I am ready," Spock replied softly.

Staurak handed the sheathed weapons to Shundak's acolyte and they moved to the door when a voice called across the hall.

"Don't you dare leave without me, Mr Spock."

Spock froze, then turned on his heel. There was his Captain in his familiar 'hands on hips' stance and with McCoy at his shoulder. Inevitably the encounter he had wished to avoid had come to pass. Ignoring the Doctor's obvious amazement at his warrior-like appearance, Spock replied, "This is pointless, Captain. I have already told

you that outworlders may not attend."

"Yes, so you did. But you got that all wrong, Mr Spock." Kirk strolled down the hall to stand squarely in front of his so alien-looking First Officer and looked him full in the face. "You see, I have it on the best authority that, as your friend, I am entitled to attend you in ritual combat. That is the true Warrior's tradition, Spock. Did you not know?"

Spock had turned pale. "Who told you that?"

"Your own history teacher. Do you question Professor Sradek's authority, Spock?"

Spock's heart missed a beat and the Vulcans behind him stirred uneasily. "Captain," he said sharply, "I trust that you did not tell..."

"I did not," Kirk cut in. "I gave you my word, didn't I? I only asked Sradek for some additional information that you were unable to give me. He was quite helpful and prolix on the subject of Pre-Reformation Vulcan. Incidentally, he was rather disappointed in his best pupil," he added pointedly.

"I see," the Vulcan replied tightly. "I should have taken your resourcefulness into account."

"But you did not," Kirk countered, "which leaves us with this issue. You no longer have Warrior rites as an excuse to stop me. It won't work." His voice became persuasive, his eyes compelling. "Spock, let me come with you, please."

"Do not ask this of me, Jim - I cannot." Spock's eyes burned in a face rigid with icy control.

McCoy quickly intervened in a low voice, "Jim, you're pushing!"

"Shut up, Bones. Don't you try and interfere," Kirk snapped. "Spock... Remember what we have been through together. Haven't we always wriggled out of the most desperate situations together? Don't you know that?"

"I know," Spock said in a hoarse voice, "but you don't know what you ask of me, Jim."

"Then tell me."

They were interrupted by Shundak's grave voice. "Spock, time is running out. We must leave now."

"Spock, please let me go with you," Kirk pleaded. His gaze locked with Spock's in a last attempt to overcome the Vulcan's obstinacy. At last Spock seemed to reach a decision and nodded reluctantly.

"Very well, Captain. As you wish... but the nights are cold on the desert; you should put on a cloak," he said quietly.

"Right. I won't be a minute..." Kirk flashed him a smile, turned round...and collapsed as a neck pinch was applied with flawless precision. Spock caught him as he fell, swept him up in his arms and said to the watching Vulcans, "One moment. This will not take long." Followed by McCoy he carried his Captain back to the sitting room.

As they made Kirk comfortable on the settee the Doctor dryly remarked, "A rather drastic measure, Spock. I suppose it was the logical thing to do?"

Spock's fingers brushed Kirk's forehead, then he straightened up and looked at McCoy with sombre eyes. "It was the only thing to do, Doctor. I cannot let him risk his life again in rituals which do not concern him."

"Quite," McCoy agreed. "I know you did it for the best, Spock. Don't worry, I'll look after him."

"Thank you for your understanding, McCoy. I must go now."

The Doctor nodded wordlessly, overcome by a strange emotion. He cleared his throat and said, "Oh, Spock?"

"Doctor?" Spock paused in the doorway.

"Spock... at least try not to get killed."

Spock cocked an eyebrow and replied, "I shall do my best, Doctor." He shut the door quietly behind him.

With a sigh, McCoy turned back to Jim Kirk. As he checked Kirk's pulse he heard the front door close then the drone of the skimmer taking off.

Moments later Kirk came round under the watchful eyes of McCoy and Staurak who, mindful of Spock's last recommendation to look after the Humans, had brought the Doctor his medi-kit. McCoy, hearing the Captain mumble disjointed words, grasped his shoulder and shook him gently.

"Easy, Jim, easy. You'll be all right," he said as he gave him a stimulant.

When Kirk opened his eyes he found a pair of vivid blue eyes smiling down at him. "Bones?" Kirk looked dazedly around. "What am I doing here? Where's Spock?"

"You passed out, Jim." McCoy informed him. "Don't you remember?"

"I only remember falling into an endless black hole," Kirk complained as he tried to sit up. "Ouch, my neck." He

Several figures were assembled by the fire and turned as the newcomers approached. One of them broke from the group and exchanged salutes with Shundak, who had moved on ahead.

Spock, closely wrapped in his warm cloak, waited silently and felt strangely distant, as if the ceremony hardly concerned him at all. He looked on as the rites were duly performed and idly wondered why Stonn had deemed it necessary to come escorted by seven attendants, when the D'Alik'Tal rules stipulated two or three at the most.

The lessons that Spock had received from his grandfather and Professor Sradek regarding Vulcan history and folklore had been so comprehensive that he had become something of an expert. No wonder if his old teacher had shown displeasure upon hearing that his prize pupil had all but forgotten his tuition. Still, Jim had been right; better to let Sradek believe in Spock's deficiency than to let him know what was happening.

Jim... For a brief moment, Spock let his thoughts drift back to his Captain. With a sense of guilt he thought *Will he understand? Will he forgive?* He clenched his fists and gave himself a mental shake. Enough! This was not the time for debilitating emotions. He must concentrate on the immediate issue; to try and disable Stonn rapidly so as to put an honourable end to this deplorable affair.

Already a faint rosy hue heralded the dawn and diminished the darkness on the horizon. The time was near. The attendants and seconds studied the sky and began preparing the combatants for the fight. Spock shook off his cape and Shundak took the weapons and solemnly presented them, on his outstretched hands, to Spock. The two men stood still, unspoken thoughts flowing between them, then Spock grasped the ceremonial

sword and dagger, one in each hand. Their blades glittered in the firelight as he held them crossed against his chest.

Stonn was likewise prepared, then the two were led to the battle-site and they took their positions face to face. The others formed a circle around them and began chanting the traditional words of the ritual. When they fell silent Spock and Stonn saluted, lowered their weapons and stood poised for the attack, watching each other measuringly.

A hush fell over the clearing. The atmosphere had a sense of watchfulness, as if time itself was holding its breath. The Vulcans looked at the sky, at the scarlet dawn rising over the desert. Suddenly the howl of a Le-matya, hunting for prey, ripped the magical stillness and stirred the expectant men.

"The Le-matya, Spock," Shundak whispered with controlled excitement. "The symbol of our Clan, the sign that you will win."

As if on cue a hoarse command was shouted, a drum began to beat and like unleashed predators the duellists sprang into action and met in a clash of steel.

A moody silence hovered over Amanda's sitting room. Important information laced with a few home truths had been exchanged. T'Pring's responsibility had been brought to light but finally Humans and Vulcans had to face the naked fact that, in McCoy's words, 'Nothing short of a miracle could change the course of events, even supposing that such things existed.' T'Kahalin, for one, was not far from secretly hoping for such an irrational thing to happen.

felt his sore muscles with a cautious hand and winced.

"Allow me, Captain," said Staurak's voice and strong, warm fingers began to knead his aching neck and shoulder. Kirk felt a tickling warmth penetrate his knotted muscles and soon the cramp was gone.

"Ah, that's better, thank you," Kirk breathed in relief and swung his feet to the floor. Staurak handed him a glass of his tonic 'special' then vanished discreetly, leaving McCoy to explain the situation.

Kirk sipped his drink, deep in thought, then looked at the Doctor. "Spock?" he asked.

"Yes. He's gone, Jim." McCoy paused "And I guess you know why you've got a stiff neck... the neatest neckpinch I've yet seen performed."

Kirk nodded sombrely. "So, he did that to me," he muttered, "and I, like a damn fool, fell headlong for it."

"Come on, Jim. There's no use getting miffed. You know why he did it."

"Mmmm," Kirk nodded thoughtfully. "I know... and I understand now..."

"What?" prompted McCoy.

"I understand why I keep hearing his voice in my mind."

"Oh?" The Doctor looked dubious. "And what does he say?"

Kirk gazed into the blue eyes and said softly, "He says, 'Forgive me, Jim'."

Silence fell over the two men and McCoy nodded as he remembered seeing

Spock's hand gently touch the face of his unconscious friend. "I see," he mused, "and... do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Do you forgive, Spock?"

The Captain produced a wan smile. "Of course, Bones. What else?"

Old Staurak appeared with a fresh pot of coffee and was in the act of pouring when he paused, raised his head, listened, then glided out of the door, leaving the Humans staring at each other. After a few minutes hushed voices were heard in the hall, the door opened and to their amazement T'Pol, her composure somewhat ruffled, sailed into the room; following in her wake was the most charming Vulcan of their acquaintance.

As the two men scrambled to their feet T'Pol said peremptorily, "Kirk, Staurak tells me that Spock has already left. Alas, we come too late; but why could you not have stopped him?"

Chapter 13

A myriad of stars displayed their spangled splendour in the pre-dawn darkness of the sky. The night wind had dwindled to a light breeze which still sent sand swirling around the three figures that climbed the steep path, scattered with rocks and boulders, up to the appointed place.

They made their way through a defile and reached the clearing on top of the knoll. This was the Ha'aka, the traditional gathering place of the Lla'Hanak Clan. A big fire blazed in the middle and sent shadows dancing on the huge standing stones raised in a circle.

McCoy broke the quiet by asking for the umpteenth time, "How much longer until dawn?"

T'Pol remained aloofly silent but T'Kahalin, sitting quietly on the couch with her hands clasped in her lap, raised her eyes. "Soon, Doctor... very soon." Her low voice was carefully controlled but McCoy was not fooled and his heart sank at her obvious distress.

"Damn," he muttered, feeling utterly helpless.

The Captain, being used to taking action, was champing at the bit and finally could not stand his helplessness any more. He hit the arm of his chair with a clenched fist and burst out, "No. This is unacceptable. I can't believe that Spock is fighting for his life while we sit here doing nothing. There surely must be some alternative, some way..."

T'Pol eyed Kirk with curiosity. "You are very persistent, Kirk, and yet you could not persuade Spock..."

"What could I do, Madam," he countered sharply, "when Spock is bound by your traditions? When he must follow the dictates of your primitive laws? What could I have done?"

Quite unruffled by his outburst, she nodded approvingly. "Indeed. I am pleased to note that Spock's behaviour has been in every way that of a Vulcan."

"A fat lot of good that's going to do him at the moment," the Doctor commented wryly.

It earned him a "Ah, there is our sharp-tongued Healer," from the old lady who, of all things, looked amused.

Kirk, doggedly following his idea, continued, "With all due respect, Madam,

I find it hard to understand why Vulcans, reputedly the most civilised people of the Federation, choose to turn a blind eye on these illegal, savage practices for the sake of some obsolete traditions."

T'Pol's dark eyes swept from Kirk to McCoy, noting on the way T'Kahalin's expression of startled interest, then back to Kirk.

"Our traditions, Captain," she said coldly, "are the essence of Vulcan. In observing these ancient rites we identify with our past, we acknowledge what our ancestors were and what we have become."

"At the cost of Vulcan lives?" Kirk answered back.

"If necessary," she replied austere, "at the cost of lives. But you, Captain, who are you to pass judgement on us? You hold in your hand the lives of your officers and crew. You do not hesitate at the call of duty, to order them to..."

"What is the meaning of this?" a deep voice behind them suddenly demanded.

At first they were frozen in surprise then they turned as one and Kirk recovering his voice, blurted out, "Good God - Sarek!"

It was indeed Ambassador Sarek, a study in awesome Vulcan dignity. Behind him came Amanda, still wrapped in her elegant, high-collared travelling cloak and wearing an expression of polite surprise on her face.

"Who said that miracles don't exist!" exclaimed a beaming Doctor. "Thank Heavens, Ambassador, that you have arrived."

"Indeed," T'Pol calmly agreed.



"Your arrival is most timely, Sarek. We did not expect you so promptly."

"We were able to conclude the conference sooner than anticipated," Sarek replied, dropping his heavy cape on a chair. Then looking perplexed he said, "May I know what all this is about? You and T'Kahalin are welcome in my house, T'Pau, but this is hardly the proper time for social calls. As for you, gentlemen, all I can say is that you surprise me."

"Sarek," Kirk spoke deliberately, "this is not a party but rather a council of war and it concerns Spock."

"Spock?" Amanda broke in anxiously. "What about Spock? Where is he?"

"I am afraid that at the moment he is fighting a duel somewhere out in the desert. If you want to see him back safe and sound you had better hurry," the Captain grimly retorted.

Amanda went white and sank onto the couch. "Oh, my God," she whispered. "A duel? Spock? I can't believe it." She looked up at her husband, who stood as if turned to stone. "Sarek, please. Do something."

The Vulcan took a deep breath then sat down heavily. "T'Pau, explain."

"Time is of the essence, Sarek," she told him. "Suffice it to say for the present that yesterday Stonn challenged Spock to Kun Kalaish Kae which your son rightly accepted. However we have reason to believe that Stonn acted on T'Pring's instigation and we also suspect some perfidious implication in this affair. As it is not my place to interfere in Warrior matters, there is only you, Sarek."

Her words hung in the air and they all waited for his response. Sarek paused

to consider then said gravely, "As you are aware, T'Pau, before I can act I must have sufficient reason to justify my intervention. One does not oppose age-old ritual with impunity."

"My God! Isn't Spock's life sufficient reason?" McCoy expostulated.

"To me, Doctor, it is more than sufficient," Sarek replied simply, "but it is unthinkable that I could take such unprecedented steps merely for personal considerations."

"You forget one thing, Ambassador," Kirk put in. "These combats, I am told, are illegal, therefore whoever practices them is in breach of the law. Isn't it your duty as a Vulcan, as a member of the High Council, to see that the law is enforced?"

"A good point, Captain," Sarek nodded appreciatively. "That is indeed the sole, valid argument that I can act on. That and my position as the Male Head of our Clan." He stood up, picked up his cloak. "Let us go. Where is the meeting?"

A tense pause followed, then T'Kahalin told him. "No-one knows. They kept the place a secret."

"Yes, someone does but he won't tell," McCoy interjected.

"Who, Doctor? Specify." There was no mistaking the authority in the Ambassador's voice.

"Staurak, sir. He knows the place but Spock forbade him to tell us lest we should go and barge in," the Doctor explained succinctly... no need to give Spock's true reason.

Obviously, Sarek was not duped. "I see," he said dryly. "A wise precaution... which does not, however, concern me."

He turned round and called, "Staurak." The old Vulcan emerged from the shadows where he had been discreetly waiting. His truthful eyes were fixed on Sarek's face.

"Staurak," the latter said gently, "will you give me your thoughts?"

"Willingly," Staurak replied. He grasped Sarek's hand and both closed their eyes. Sarek stood motionless, absorbing the vital information, while Kirk and McCoy watched in fascination. The Vulcans opened their eyes as the link faded and Sarek, with a grim look on his face, reported, "The combat takes place on the Ha'Aka Hill."

"Why the Ha'Aka?" Amanda asked. "Is that the meeting place of Stonn's clan?"

"It is not," T'Pau stated. "Sarek this is strange. What has the Lla'Hanak Clan to do with Stonn? Unless...?"

"Indeed, this is most disquieting," Sarek replied. "Staurak? Did Spock give you the reason for the choice of Ha'Aka?"

"No. He said only that it was recommended by Stonn's attendants because of its seclusion."

"Stonn's attendants? Who are they?"

Staurak shook his head. "I do not know. However, Captain Kirk probably does as he was at the Kun Kalaish Kee."

As all the attention focused on Kirk, he felt that he at last had a chance to put a word in. "One moment," he said. "What is all this about the Lla'Hanak Clan? What does that mean?"

"It means, Kirk, that you were right. There does seem to be some treachery at

work. The Lla'Hanak are a sect of fanatics who want Vulcan to re-discover its Warrior virtues. They are not averse to using extreme methods in order to achieve their purpose. Captain, you witnessed the challenge. Now can you remember the men who were with Stonn and describe them to me? This is very important."

"I shall try," Kirk replied simply as he cast his mind back to the previous day in the Gymnasium. There was nothing wrong with his memory, accustomed as he was to identifying at a glance any of the 400 men and women of his crew. So he described quite accurately the six men whom he had seen escorting Stonn. He added, "I can also give you their names. As I recall there was Sopek, Soniak... er... Trail, and Sar, no.. Xar or Xour."

"X'our? Did you say X'our, Kirk?" Sarek cut in sharply.

"Yes, that it. X'our.. I am positive. Does that help?"

Sarek traded a glance with T'Pau who slowly rose to her feet. "It certainly does, Captain," he said darkly. "This is worse than I thought. Staurak, tell Sirvann that I need the skimmer in readiness. We shall leave immediately. Doctor, Captain. if you wish to join us, please prepare yourselves."

"Now you're talking," McCoy declared, picking up his medi-kit. "I'll go and get our jackets, Jim." He hurried out while Kirk rounded on Sarek.

"Sorry, sir," he said firmly, "but I want an explanation. Why are these Lla'Hanak people a menace to Spock? What do they want?"

Sarek regarded him sombrely. "Revenge, probably. Among the men you mentioned, Kirk, there is one who thinks

that he has reason to nurse resentment toward Spock, and that one is X'our."

"Why? What about him?"

"X'our was the bond-brother of Sharakan."

A gasp escaped Amanda. "Sharakan? But that was the man who..." she stammered in dismay.

"Yes," Sarek nodded, "that was the man who betrayed his people to the Romulan Empire, who abducted Spock with the help of Romulan agents and who had the audacity to force a mindprobe on my son." Sarek's voice rang with hardly controlled anger and Kirk felt a shiver run down his spine.

"My God! Do you think that Sharakan will...?"

"He will not, Kirk," T'Pol answered him. "Sharakan can no longer harm anyone. He chose to do away with himself rather than face his judges. However X'our is a member of the Lla'Hanak brotherhood and if he holds Spock responsible for the demise of his bondbrother, then..."

The implication of her words hung ominously in the air as a voice broke in, "Sir, the air-car is now ready." In the doorway stood a handsome young man who exchanged a long significant look with T'Pol. Kirk had just begun to note their striking resemblance when McCoy's voice called from behind Sirvann.

"I say. It's almost sunrise. What are we waiting for? Come on."

The ruby sun edged over the horizon, reddening the sand and the

standing stones of the clearing and flashing on the blades of the duellists locked in a deadly fight. Gone were the polished urbanity and rationality of Vulcan. This was the primitive combat of Warlords erupting from Vulcan's savage past. The drumbeat gradually increased its tempo, irresistibly urging them into a killing frenzy. Already several cuts and gashes dripping green on their arms and chests told of the implacable significance of the duel.

At first, the followers had crossed swords with their opposite numbers in the usual courtesy contests but soon the earnestness of the combat demanded all their attention. The onlookers, mindful of staying well out of the way, watched with keen interest as Stonn attacked relentlessly with Spock giving as good as he got. The two adversaries bounced back and forth in the lethal dance, sometimes leaping over the glowing embers of the fire or colliding with bone-jarring clashes.

Shundak, well aware of Spock's mastery of the martial arts, had anticipated a flawless performance but he was pleasantly surprised at his remarkable resilience and pugnacity, especially as opposed to the brute force of Stonn. To judge from the rapt attention with which Spock's every move was observed this was a surprise shared by all. They had apparently not thought that the half-breed had it in him.

A similar thought crossed the mind of the cloaked figure who stood and watched, unnoticed, in the shadow of a rock. She should be satisfied. This duel was her doing, the climax of a sequence of clever moves, which had pitted one against the other, the two men she had equally and alternately admired, desired and despised. She knew now, with certainty, that revenge was within her reach. Revenge for her frustrations, her

self-deception? She did not know and she did not care. Revenge was illogical, nevertheless it existed... it was what she craved at this moment.

Yes, she ought to be pleased... and yet, the duel was not proceeding quite as she anticipated. Both men were hurt but they were still on their feet and seemingly in possession of their full potential. Strange that Spock could hold out so long against Stonn's superior strength. Quite unexpected. Had she underestimated the half-Human? For a heartbeat T'Pol wavered, touched by an uneasy feeling of doubt, a state of mind contrasting with her usual self-assurance. Illogical! Why be concerned over the issue? Had she not provided for all eventualities? Even assuming that Stonn be killed and Spock survived, there was still an alternative...

There was a jarring clash and Spock's dagger, wrenched from his grasp, went flying and clattered against a boulder. Spock stood his ground and tightened his grip on the heavy sword. Panting slightly, muscles aching with exertion, he watched Stonn warily, knowing that with his advantage in weapons the other would make a decisive move. The assault came striking in with all the might that Stonn could muster and his sword caught Spock's shoulder, slicing deeply through leather and flesh.

Holding back the pain, Spock deflected the blade with a back-handed swipe then gave ground under Stonn's fierce attack. Encouraged by the sight of blood flowing freely down his opponent's arm Stonn pressed his advantage, launching a reckless thrust. The blades rang with the shock, hilts locked together, and the two Vulcans, caught in a deadly clinch, shoulder to shoulder, glared into each other's eyes.

With a twist of the wrist Spock wrenched his weapon free and swung it

in a downward thrust which Stonn parried a split second too late. Steel clashed against steel, and the keen edge of Spock's blade slashed into Stonn's thigh, laying it open with a gush of blood.

Cut to the bone, Stonn staggered. Dragging his leg he attempted another lunge but Spock fended off the blade with an irresistible swipe which sent it flying and brought his opponent to his knees. With a grunt of pain Stonn struggled to pull himself up, but his knees buckled and he fell heavily onto the sand.

Abruptly, the frenetic drumbeat ceased. Slowly, Spock lowered his green-stained sword. The helpless man looked up at him with pain-filled eyes and an undefinable glance passed between them. The others began to close in, forming a circle, in expectation of the inevitable outcome. The drum started again, a steady, heavy beat that resounded like a knell on the Ha'aka rocks.

Still immersed in the battle-fever, Spock stared indecisively at his fallen adversary. He heard his heart pounding in his ears, felt his blood throbbing in his temples and he gripped convulsively at the hilt of his sword, as yet unsure whether it was all over. A hand touched his shoulder, a voice spoke in his ear.

"Spock! Spock, your decision?" Shundak said.

Spock looked dazedly around him, saw the silent, watchful men and read in their eyes the awful anticipation. He shuddered and slowly shook his head, as if trying to clear his confused mind...

Then, the growl of the Le-matya drawn by the scent of blood filled the air. All at once reason took control from blood-lust and Spock realised with painful clarity what he had done and what they expected him to do. His senses

reeled back to reality, to the sour smell of blood and ashes and to the defeated stare of the man lying at his feet waiting for the ritual death blow.

He shuddered with revulsion and his voice rasped. "No, no. I will not." A murmur ran round the circle and the one called X'our said stonily, "Why, Spock? It is your right... and your duty. You have won. You must finish what you began."

"No... I refuse. I will not give the finishing stroke," Spock repeated hoarsely. In finality he drove his sword into the ground where it stood, swaying gently.

"This is a combat to the death, as you ought to know," X'our pointed out. "A true Vulcan would not stay his hand."

Stung by the obvious contempt in the voice, Spock countered. "Incorrect. A true Vulcan does not kill. A true Vulcan respects life and abhors violence, as you ought to know, X'our." He looked down at Stonn and met eyes filled with anguish mingled with hope, and he whispered, "Why? Why did we do this? ...I meant you no harm..." Raising his eyes he transfixed the rest with a withering glare.

"Is not this enough? Are you not satisfied? You made us fight but you will not make me kill a stricken man. He is losing blood fast; he needs medical attention. What are you waiting for? Take him to the Healer."

Shaken by Spock's unexpected reaction and by the unmistakable aura of authority radiating from his weary but still defiant figure the Lla'Hanak men looked enquiringly at X'our. On his nod of assent they began, at last, to attend to the fallen man.

Shundak, who had listened in silence, now broke in. "I concur with

Spock," he said gravely. "The combat was well fought and in accordance with D'Alik'Tal rules. Spock has chosen to show mercy and that is good. Let it be, let Stonn live. His honour is intact."

"No. It is not," cut in a clear voice and a hooded figure emerged from the shadows to stand before them in the full light of day.

"T'Pring?" Shundak grunted disapprovingly. "Your place is not here."

"I beg to differ, Shundak," she replied disdainfully. "My place is here with my consort." She looked at Spock who was watching her in stunned silence. In a carefully neutral voice she said, "So... you win again, Spock. And you grandly spare Stonn's life. Very generous - we should be grateful, should we not?" The sarcasm in her voice gave way to cold wrath. "But I am not. Stonn failed, my honour remains tarnished. However, where Stonn has failed, others will succeed," she added cryptically. Casting a casual glance at her by now unconscious mate, she curtly ordered, "Take him away."

As his body was carried away on a stretcher, she turned to follow.

Spock, shocked by such blatant callousness, asked in a low voice, "Why, T'Pring? Why did you set Stonn against me?"

Her dark eyes searched his face and the look she gave him made him wince inwardly. "I told you that I no longer wanted Stonn," she declared coolly. "I wanted you ...but you did not want me!"

Spock, his face drained of all colour, stared at her in disbelief. "Why do you hate me so, T'Pring?" he asked finally.

"I am Vulcan, I have no hate," she



retorted. "Hate is a Human fault."

"This is hate you have, T'Pring. Human hate is merciful besides yours. I know, I have seen it."

Her eyes flashed with spiteful wrath. "How dare you pass judgement on me, Spock. How dare you be so arrogant." Then controlling herself she declared contemptuously, "Kaiidith. We have nothing more to say to each other." Casting a meaningful glance at X'our she said coldly, "He is all yours." With ramrod-stiff posture she left, disappearing from view behind the standing stones.

Shundak watched her go, his disapproval obvious. He looked at Spock who stood numb from shock and loss of blood. "Come, Spock," he said quietly, taking him by the arm. "Let us go. Your wounds must be attended to. Come." He beckoned to his assistant but found X'our standing in his way.

"One moment, Shundak. The combat is not finished. You heard T'Pring. Stonn failed so we will now take his place and continue."

Shundak's face darkened with controlled anger. "What Stonn's consort said is irrelevant," he snapped. "The D'Alik'Tal was arranged and agreed upon yesterday. Spock has defeated Stonn in fair fight. The matter is now over. Come, Spock."

X'our made a sign and his acolytes closed in. "You are not going anywhere." The Vulcan's meaning was ominously clear. "Spock, I claim my right to fight you here and now. Kun'Kalaish'Kae." To stress his challenge he viciously struck Spock's wounded shoulder. Spock went livid, sick with pain, while an outraged Master-at Arms interposed forcefully.

"I protest. This is highly irregular, an act of treachery. X'our, you have no right."

The other looked amused. "Here, I have every right. This is not your Gymnasium, Shundak. This is the Ha'aka where I do as I please. No-one can hinder me."

"I can... and I will." Bristling with righteous indignation Shundak grasped the hilt of his sword and drew it purposefully. "Have you taken leave of your senses?" he demanded. "Have you no decency? As long as I..." He gasped and collapsed, hit by a brutal neck-grip. The same fate befell his assistant, who had rushed to his rescue.

"Good," X'our said with satisfaction, "now the coast is clear. Leave them there. I have no quarrel with them, but..." He spun on his heel. His eyes burned with cold hatred. "But I have with the half-breed. Spock, face to face at last. I have long awaited this moment. Take up your sword and defend yourself."

Gritting his teeth to hold back the excruciating pain throbbing in his arm and shoulder, Spock looked down at his supporters as they sprawled unconscious on the ground. An odd sense of finality swept over him as T'Pring's words became clear. She had indeed spun her web flawlessly. He was alone, aching and utterly sick and tired of the whole affair. He had abided by the ancient laws, he had done what they expected of him, and yet, it was not enough. These fanatics demanded still more... more violence, more bloodshed.

He raised his eyes and straightening up with an effort calmly said, "I decline the challenge, X'our. What you claim is illogical; I have no quarrel with you, I will not fight."

"You will, Spock. If you have one drop of Vulcan blood in you, you will. The time has now come. I shall make you pay for the death of my Thy'la who suffered disgrace and agony because of you. You miserable half-breed, you will pay for the death of Sharakan."

Spock's breath caught in his throat and he stood transfixed, chilled to the marrow. This shock, right after the blow delivered by T'Pring, was enough to shake any Vulcan, let alone one on the verge of exhaustion. Sharakan! At the mere mention of the name, all the mental agony that Spock had suffered, that he had, through severe discipline, buried deep in the unconscious levels of his mind, all this returned with a vengeance. The horror and humiliation he had undergone as Sharakan had raped his mind to force from it the classified data surged up and chilled his soul. For a brief awful moment Spock saw himself back in the cave with Sharakan's face hovering over him, Sharakan's fingers gripping his head and Sharakan forcing entry into his mind to seek out the vital information.

Breathing heavily, Spock closed his eyes and fought desperately to regain control of himself. Finally, years of sternly practised discipline came into play and when he reopened his eyes he was able to face the Lla'Hanak brethren with tolerable composure.

X'our had been watching him with bitter satisfaction. "I see Sharakan left his mark on your mind, Spock. At least when you die, you will know the reason why. You will be destroyed as you destroyed him."

"It is contrary to Vulcan ethics to avenge a death by another death, X'our," Spock replied. "What befell Sharakan was of his own doing. He chose a dangerous path, a path of duplicity and high treason. His downfall, his tragic

end, were the inevitable consequences which he brought upon himself."

"How dare you! How dare you speak of Sharakan in such terms," X'our hissed in rage. "You will pay for your arrogance, Spock. KaK'Duk!"

The old war cry was taken up by his followers and the Vulcans advanced on Spock, swords drawn and murder in their eyes.

Spock knew his chances of survival were slim. He felt drained of feeling, of thought, and yet one weary, fatalistic thought emerged in his mind for a split second: why struggle any more? If his destiny was to die on the Ha'aka Hill, in some kind of propitiatory sacrifice, why not yield to the inevitable and let these fanatics accomplish their distasteful ritual?

Then as the scream of the Le'matya echoed again on the hill, Spock's dual nature reacted and he rebelled at the thought. If two years ago he had resisted Sharakan and his Romulan accomplices, it was not done to give in now. He had to fight, he owed it to himself, to his proud heritage, and above all, to his Captain. Jim would never give up. Jim... Unconsciously, his weary soul sent a last message to his Captain.

Jim... farewell, T'Hy'la. At least you are safe.

Now was not the time for vain regrets. X'our and his acolytes were closing in on him. If he was to die, at least let it be with dignity. Spock backed a few steps, and his hip knocked against the hilt of his sword where it still stood in the sand. In one fluid movement he pulled it out, gripped it in both hands and squared up to his challengers. His body was as taut as a strung bow, all indecision, pain and weariness were shed

like discarded rags. From head to foot he stood revealed as the Vulcan Warlord once again.

Puffing and blowing, Doctor McCoy was trudging up the uneven path to that god-forsaken place, the Ha'aka. Running uphill in the thin air and crushing heat was no picnic and McCoy knew that despite a double dose of tri-ox he could not keep up this pace much longer. Jim was jogging ahead with dogged determination, keeping pace with the Vulcans. How could he do it? Heavens only knew but he was certain that the faint mindlink, back in the air-car, which had proved Spock was still alive had galvanised both Kirk and the Vulcans. The Doctor would never have thought Sarek and old Staurak capable of moving so fast.

The next moment, McCoy tripped and caught himself against a boulder. The shock made him bend over and groan as he thought, *God! I'll never make it.* He felt a pair of hands grip his arms and lift him up. A pair of grey eyes looked enquiringly down at him. McCoy, his breath coming in shudders, mustered a weak smile and gasped, "Thank you... 'm all right, Go... go! Don't wait for me."

He was pulled to his feet, caught up by a strong arm and dragged on shaky legs up the rocky hillside. *Thank goodness for sheer Vulcan strength... and for that young aide of Sarek's,* McCoy thought. *Damn good-looking boy, just like his sister... and a damn good pilot, too. Never thought a skimmer could make warp speed or almost.* McCoy's stomach churned retrospectively at the thought of the breakneck pace at which Sirvann had driven the craft all the way from ShiKahr. *More like a ruddy rocket than an air-car. Still 'Time is of the essence', as Sarek said.*

With Sirvann's help, the Doctor managed to catch up with Kirk and the others. As they rounded a cliff a fearsome howl made them jump and they came face to face with a huge, grey lion-like beast. At their appearance the animal bared its fangs in anger and growled, then bounded away through the tumble of rocks.

"What the hell was that?" McCoy whispered in awe.

"A Le-matya, Doctor," Sarek informed him without slackening his pace.

Within moments, Kirk and McCoy arrived at the top and staggered to a halt. Their hearts stopped beating for impossible seconds at the sight which met their eyes: there were several bodies lying about and a band of four fanatics with weapons were bearing down, like a pack of wolves, on the lone figure of Spock who was fending them off with a strength born of desperation. He was slowly giving ground until his back met with the face of a standing stone. He was so hard-pressed that he couldn't even wipe his eyes clear of the blood running from a deep cut in his scalp. Driven back against the stone all he could do was grit his teeth and tighten his grip on the sword. He knew the end was near.

Suddenly... commotion. As if in a dream, Spock perceived people running into the clearing, heard familiar voices shout his name... and there was his father, a picture of outraged Vulcanity, who thundered, "Kroykah!" with such virulence that X'our and his followers froze before swinging round to face the intruders. Sarek? And Jim? Here? Impossible!

Stunned with disbelief, Spock could only watch through a green haze the implacable efficiency with which his

rescuers dealt with his adversaries. Staurak and Sirvann, armed with swords secured from the fallen warriors, cornered X'our and Trall and forced them to surrender, while his father and his Captain disposed of the rest with, respectively, a punishing nerve-pinch and a deftly dealt Karate chop. In no time, the newcomers had gained control of the battlefield.

Overcome by shock and the pain of his shoulder, Spock closed his eyes and sagged against the stone. His fantastic Vulcan endurance had finally reached its limits. Kirk caught him as he swayed, bloodied and exhausted but still on his feet.

"Spock, it's finished... it's all over now," Jim's voice said in his ear. "Easy now... let go, Spock." Spock felt a tug at his sword and instinctively tightened his grip.

"What do you think you're doing, Spock?" rasped another familiar voice. "Do you mean to make mince-meat of your Captain?"

Painfully, Spock eased his clenched hands and let go. "Sorry, Doctor," he mumbled, "but... my hands..."

"I know, Spock. I know," McCoy replied kindly. "Your hands are a mess. You're a mess," he amended while running his medi-scanner over the Vulcan. "What you need is immediate care. Jim, we must take him back to ShiKahr at once. He's lost too much blood already."

"Doctor," Staurak intervened, "with your permission, Sirvann and I will carry him to the skimmer."

"Splendid," Kirk said. "If you two give us a hand..."

"Unnecessary. I can walk," cut in Spock, weak but determined and slightly put-out by the offhand manner in which they were making decisions without consulting him.

"No, you won't," the Doctor countered gruffly. He was gently wiping the blood from the Vulcan's face and covered his concern with a typically irascible retort. "Who's the Doctor here? If I say that you're not fit to walk, I know what I'm talking about. Be logical, Spock. You can hardly stand, much less walk down that hill... It's madness."

"Doctor, I admit I am somewhat fatigued but I am quite capable of walking... with some help," Spock affirmed feebly, adding as if on second thoughts. "Will someone look after Shundak? He and his second were set on for standing up for me."

"Don't worry," Kirk told him. "They're fine, Staurak saw to that. At the moment Shundak is with your father, dealing with that band of ruffians. I have the strong impression that X'our and co. are not overjoyed about it."

"Yeah. Looks like Sarek is giving them a piece of his mind," McCoy remarked with interest after a glance at the Ambassador's mask of frigid wrath. "You know, Spock, if your father was Human I'd say he was in a towering rage. If he were Human, of course." Taking a hypo out of his medi-kit, he made his decision. "Okay, Spock, we'll compromise. I'll give you a shot to keep you on your feet for a while, but at the first sign of weakness, you'll have to let us carry you. And no argument, mind you."

"Very well, Doctor," Spock answered meekly, knowing he had made his point. His two friends exchanged a look and McCoy shrugged slightly. Both

were well aware of Spock's Vulcan pride which demanded that he depart from the Ha'aka with dignity; battered, perhaps, but resolutely still on his feet.

"Spock," a deep voice said beside them. It was Sarek, whose usually impassive expression wavered at the sight of his son. A look of concern glimmered in his dark eyes as they took stock of Spock's appearance, the bleeding wounds and extreme lassitude.

Supporting himself on Kirk's shoulder, Spock painfully straightened up. "Father," he murmured in greeting. A long, pregnant glance passed between father and son... and that was all. The utter relief and justified pride that they felt remained unspoken.

Spock!... No...no. Oh, my God! Jim Kirk woke up with a start and, coming back to reality, exhaled a breath of relief as his senses registered the purr of the skimmer as it flew swiftly back to ShiKahr. He could hear the muted voice of Sarek speaking into the com-unit on Sirvann's console and more reassuring still, Spock's halting breathing as he lay, hurt and vulnerable but alive, in the reclining seat beside him. Looking up, Kirk met a pair of quizzical blue eyes.

"Taking a nap, Jim?" McCoy asked quietly.

"Yeah...no, not exactly. Rather a nightmare. For a moment, Bones, I was back up on that hill... and we arrived to late."

The Doctor noted the haunted look in the Captain's eyes and nodded. "Normal reaction, Jim. After all the excitement, not to mention the lack of sleep and the surfeit of emotional shocks it's no wonder you feel drained. What

you need first is a good long sleep, right round the clock and then some real 'Rest and Relaxation'. The same goes for him," he added making another pass over Spock with his scanner. "Once he's on his feet again, I'll see to it that he takes things easy."

"Doctor." Sarek came over and sat beside them. "Doctor, and you too, Kirk, I have a message from Amanda. She... er... she sends you her love. I am afraid this informal expression of gratitude must be attributed to an excessively emotional reaction. However, an understandable one in the present circumstances."

"Quite understandable, Ambassador," Kirk agreed, straight-faced.

"I have also notified T'Lian of our progress," Sarek continued imperturbably. "She has an intensive care room ready for Spock. Incidentally, Stonn is already there. At the moment he is in the operating theatre."

"Oh... was he badly hurt?" McCoy asked with professional interest.

"According to T'Lian he received very serious wounds but his prospects for recovery are good."

"Then all's well that ends well, but it was a close thing," Kirk remarked with a retrospective shiver. "I'd hate to think what would have happened, Sarek, if you hadn't returned early."

"Indeed," Sarek replied soberly, gazing at his son. "Doctor, your diagnosis?" he presently asked. "How is he now?"

"As well as can be expected, considering the strain he's been through and the loss of blood," McCoy said non-committally. "That mind-touch you did has certainly improved his condition."

Sarek nodded, "A pain absorbing meld, Doctor which we initiate when the patient is unable to control his own pain. I presume," he added after a short pause, "that a blood transfusion will be indicated."

"Definitely," McCoy replied, "his blood loss must be restored before any surgery."

"In that case, Doctor, you have no need to look far for a compatible donor," Sarek pointed out. "If you remember..."

"I am not likely to forget that. T-Negative. That rare blood type gave us enough trouble on the trip to Babel. Yes, that would be the best answer provided that your present physical condition warrants it, of course. Spock needs quite a lot of blood."

"I believe it does," Sarek replied. "Thanks to you, Doctor, I am now in perfect health."

"No... I cannot... I refuse." Spock was trying to rise and looking much perturbed.

"Spock, don't. Easy now." Kirk put a supporting arm around his friend's shoulders and eased him gently down.

"Jim, tell McCoy," Spock insisted feebly. "It would cause too great a strain... I cannot accept... Not Sarek."

"Now, now," McCoy's bedside manner came into play. "Don't put yourself into a fret. No-one is going to jeopardise your father's life, you can be sure of that. You just relax, everything's gonna be fine."

Spock shook his head, his dark eyes clouded with pain and worry. He was not convinced.

Sarek leaned over, laid a hand on Spock's brow and locked gazes with his son. "Spock," he spoke quietly as he would to a child, "you are being unreasonable. Why can you not accept that I do for you now what you did for me when my life depended on it? It is as logical now as it was then. As your mother would say, it is but a fair return."

Surprised, McCoy met Kirk's eyes and the same thought came to both minds. Father and son had come a long way since that memorable day on the Enterprise. Spock stared up at his father, wavered, then giving up, nodded his acceptance. He was too tired to object any more.

As Sarek removed his hand and straightened up, Spock unexpectedly gave a big, cat-like yawn and, closing his eyes, let his head fall heavily onto his Captain's shoulder.

"Bones," the latter said anxiously, "what's wrong? He's passed out."

McCoy chuckled in answer. "Wrong, Jim. Spock has just fallen asleep." He cocked an eyebrow at the Ambassador. "Your doing, Sarek?"

"Yes, Doctor. A light peace-inducing sleep which produces much the same effect as your chemical tranquillisers but without their unpleasant after-effects."

McCoy grunted appreciatively. As he looked at Spock, at his Warrior's trappings and his blissful innocence as he slept, McCoy could not but be touched and also infinitely thankful for the happy turn of events. His eyes met Jim's, then Sarek's, and he knew that all three shared the same feeling of gratitude.



